



MONASH University

*Language, loss and time:
2009 Black Saturday bushfires in
Victoria*

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Abstract

Contributing to the growing body of work that seeks to extend knowledge about the human dimensions of hazard and disaster, this research grapples with loss, grief, displacement and estrangement in the wake of bushfire. Environmental threats are escalating and the Earth is under pressure like never before. More people are putting themselves at risk of being affected by bushfires at a time when their frequency and severity is predicted to intensify. Australian bushfire scholars have neglected the intangible difficult-to-articulate losses and the significance of language, originating at the official ‘macro’ level. The ‘recovery’ discourse specifically its sway and how it makes fire-affected people *feel over time* warrants greater scrutiny.

During January-February 2009, hundreds of fires burned across the State of Victoria. Five of those fires claimed 173 lives on 7 February 2009, the highest death toll in the post-colonial records of bushfire related fatalities in Australia. On and around that date, named Black Saturday, in excess of 2000 homes were destroyed rendering over 7000 people homeless. This qualitative study is geographically situated in Central Gippsland and focuses on the *afterwards*, engaging with the myriad of upheavals in the months and years following this catastrophic event.

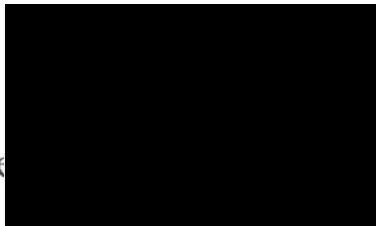
Primary material obtained from men and women of the Latrobe Valley reveal the fragilities of home and the complexities of both negative and positive emotions associated with re-creating or re-configuring intimate domestic spaces after a crisis. Theories of the meaning of home – and how they are linked to identity – enrich our understanding of the constantly shifting dynamics of loss, grief and transformation in the post-bushfire space.

This narrative inquiry examines the nuances and strains or *grey areas* of dispossession, trauma and estrangement. The author explores how the generic ‘recovery’ response helps, hinders or confounds bushfire-affected people. With the assistance of Pierre Bourdieu’s ‘thinking tools’ and secondary literature from diverse fields, this thesis analyses the social and emotional *entanglements* contained within the Latrobe Valley interview recordings and transcripts. This work suggests that failing to acknowledge or validate the less apparent multisensory losses can confuse or prolong the processing of grief that fire-affected people contend with in the aftermath of bushfire. The insufficiency of conventional language for describing complicated post-disaster realities is examined.

Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signature



Print Name:

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4/3/19

Publications during enrolment

Proudley, M 2013, 'Place matters', *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, vol. 28, no. 2, pp. 11-16.

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A writer needs certain conditions in which to work and create. She needs a piece of time; a peace of mind; a quiet place; and a private life (Margaret Walker cited in Marcus, 2010, p. 43).

Completing this research has been a drawn out and sometimes a painful process. I am grateful to the Gender, Leadership and Social Sustainability (GLASS) Research Unit for providing a scholarship that allowed me to immerse myself in this challenging and rewarding task.

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I would like to acknowledge the *places* that have facilitated my research. There are multiple interior landscapes that I will always associate with this work. Primarily the Morrissey family home in Traralgon South: their caring hospitality and support enabled me to live, albeit briefly, in a fire-affected landscape and crucially acquire my primary material.

In order to write about disruption and displacement I needed to escape my own home. I have, over the last four years, occupied diverse spaces: a neighbour's spare room, a backyard bungalow, a second floor bedroom with a sea view, a small flat in the midst of boats in dry dock (to name a few). Those distinct interiors and exteriors have enhanced my sensory appreciation of 'home' as an intimate space and contributed, covertly, to my writing.

In my immediate family: three extremely patient blokes – large, small and furry – adapted to, and made allowances for, my unconventional work practices.

For my Dad

Acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ATSI	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
ACGB	Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement
BoM	Bureau of Meteorology
CFA	Country Fire Authority (Victoria)
CFS	Country Fire Service (South Australia)
CWA	Country Women's Association
DHS	Department of Human Services ¹
DSE	Department of Sustainability and Environment ²
FMD	Foot-and-mouth disease
LEP	Lower Eyre Peninsula
PNG	Papua New Guinea
LGA	Local Government Area
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
SA	South Australia
UNISDR	United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction
VBRC	Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission
VBRA	Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority
VBCMS	Victorian Bushfire Case Management Service

¹ At the time of writing, it is named: Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

² At the time of writing, it is named: Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP). For the purpose of consistency I have used 'DHS' and 'DSE' throughout this thesis as those were the current names when the interviews were conducted.

Disasters are not truly physical events, but are rather socially constructed, manufactured over long periods of time.

(Susanna Hoffman, 2008, p. 19)

Not only may emotional experiences drive our research interests, but the actual 'emotion work' of doing research enters the social construction of knowledge in profound ways. This is not a question of choice, but is inevitable...researchers need to be reflexive about how emotions enter and influence the processes whereby we come to know and interpret the spatialities of our worlds.

(Isabel Dyck, 2007, p. 450).

Questions should be asked not only about the unhoused and the ill-housed, but also about the well-being of the relatively well-housed who do not experience a sense of being at home.

(Robin. A. Kearns & Christopher J. Smith, 1994, p. 420).

Table of Contents

Copyright notice	ii
Abstract	iii
Declaration	iv
Publications during enrolment	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Acronyms	vi
List of Maps	
Map 1: Locations of fires & fatalities, State of Victoria, Black Saturday	59
Map 2: Fire perimeter of the Churchill-Jeeralang fire in Central Gippsland	63
List of Images	
Image 1: Photograph of the looming bushfire taken by an interviewee on 7 February 2009	3
Image 2: <i>Stitch & Chat</i> embroidery	60
Image 3: Transcriptions of the 25 Gippsland interviews	67
Image 4: More primary material: the completed reduction process	69
Image 5a: Immersion in transcript	81
Image 5b: Deep listening	81
Image 5c: Isolating the themes	81
Image 6: Photograph taken from a vehicle by an interviewee as she was evacuating her home	84
Image 7: This ornament was salvaged from the ruins of a home in the Latrobe Valley	88
Image 8: A participant in this study, a musician, salvaged her flute from the wreckage	88
Image 9: The post-bushfire scarred landscape	104
Image 10: The 'For Sale' sign was a common sight	112
Image 11: Photograph of the natural re-generation	175
Chapter One: Introduction: "life goes on..."	1
South Australia	1
Black Saturday	3
Place and home	4
Time	5
Structure of the thesis	6

Chapter Two: Digging into the literature: “loss of a stable ground”	9
Introduction	9
Fire, First People and ‘country’	10
Grief	13
Environmental hazards and disasters	14
Bushfire	16
Place	18
Home, identity, life cycle and memory	18
Possessions	23
Living possessions: livestock	27
The chilling absence of ‘stuff’	28
Everyday sensory practices and intangible loss	31
Solastalgia and non-spaces	33
Contested words: trauma, recovery and resilience	36
Conclusion	38
Chapter Three: Narrative inquiry & Pierre Bourdieu	40
Introduction	40
Part One	40
Overarching paradigmatic stance	40
Social constructivism and social constructionism	41
Qualitative research	42
Methodology	44
Narrative inquiry	44
Trauma narratives	47
Part Two	48
The ‘thinking tools’ of Pierre Bourdieu	48
Practice, habitus and field	48
Hysteresis	51
The power of language	52
Bourdieu’s reflexivity	53
Conclusion	54
Chapter Four: The Research Process	56
Introduction	56
Part One	56
Preliminary work	56

Making connections in the Latrobe Valley	59
Recruiting and description of participants	61
Interviews as primary material	63
Part Two	64
Interviewing and place	64
Reading and listening – reducing the narratives	67
Coding and core concepts	68
The telling	69
Duty-of-care	71
Words – theirs and mine	71
Expressive intensity	74
Relationships – within and outside the interviews	75
The weight of silence and the ‘silent wait’	76
Laughter	77
Images and mementoes	78
Understanding the meaning of knowing	80
Conclusion	82
Chapter Five: “All their treasures”	84
Introduction	84
Returning to nothing	85
Objects salvaged	88
Yearning for absent objects	90
Animals	92
Loss and identity	94
Life cycle	96
Intangible losses	98
Changed relationship with possessions	101
Conclusion	102
Chapter Six: “I saw a bird”	104
Introduction	104
Post-bushfire landscape	105
Displaced: urban living	106
Rebuild or relocate?	111
Emotions after trauma	117
Crisis unites and divides	120

Post-traumatic growth	123
Life trajectory	124
Conclusion	126
Chapter Seven: “Give yourself time”	127
Immediate response	127
Case management	129
Falling through the gaps	132
Teenagers and young children	134
Division and tension	135
Accepting help	139
Feedback	141
Informal recovery	143
Life goes on	145
Conclusion	146
Chapter Eight: Discussion: “Looking into the cracks more deeply”	149
Introduction	149
Explanation of the chapter’s structure	150
Part One	151
Home, possessions and everyday sensory practices	151
Loss of emotional associations	153
Loss of livestock	154
Part Two	159
‘The forgotten fire’	159
Language and time after bushfire	160
Case management and ambiguities	163
Surfacing	165
‘Give yourself time’	165
Bourdieuian language	166
Research/life constraints	167
Suggestions for future investigation	168
Renting	169
Younger people	169
Intergenerational trauma	170
Conclusion	172

Appendix A: MUHREC Ethics Approval	176
Appendix B: Invitation to participate in the research	177
Appendix C: Explanatory statement	178
Appendix D: Participant details	182
Appendix E: Sample of interview coding	187
Appendix F: Summary of the Churchill-Jeeralang fire	208
References	209

Chapter One

Introduction: “life goes on...”

In three words I can sum up everything I've learned in life: it goes on.

Robert Frost³, the American poet and playwright, was familiar with loss and grief: when he was eleven years old his father died; he was a widower for over thirty years and only two of his six children outlived him. This piece of writing, my thesis, is an exploration of loss, grief and how life goes on after a sudden and traumatic event. Throughout January-February 2009 hundreds of bushfires burned across the State of Victoria. Five of those fires were fatal. This research investigates and documents how people, whose lives have been devastated or disrupted by bushfire, go on.

In her reflective account on loss Helen Macdonald (2014, p. 15) described the physical sensations, “for weeks I felt I was made of dully burning metal”, which she discovered were “the normal madnesses of grief”. She noted that from the moment of learning her father had died her perception of time changed: “Time didn’t run forwards anymore. It was a solid thing that you could press yourself against and feel it push back” (Macdonald, 2014, p. 16). Her former life, that “world already gone”, had suddenly slipped away, evaporated and she was compelled to navigate her grief and locate or build a bridge to her new reality (Macdonald, 2014, p. 12).

Whilst none of the participants in this study were directly impacted by the death of a family member the physical and emotional sensations that Macdonald (2014, p. 13) eloquently recalls, particularly around the disruption to ‘ordinary’ life and grappling with the loneliness of loss; “It happens to everyone. But you feel it alone”, resonate. Re-engaging with falconry, an activity that MacDonald had undertaken with her father during her childhood, facilitated the major healing or processing of her grief. Her account is primarily about memory and returning to nature, two of the many themes that surfaced from the 25 bushfire narratives which form the core of this thesis.

South Australia

My first encounter with a fire-affected community occurred over ten years ago when I travelled with two senior researchers to the Lower Eyre Peninsula (LEP) of South Australia. We flew into

³ According to journalist and self-help writer Ray Josephs, Robert Frost uttered these words during his eightieth birthday celebration: sourced from <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2018/04/01/life-goes/>

Port Lincoln, the largest town in the region, which is located 645 kilometres west of Adelaide, the State's capital city. Outside of Port Lincoln the LEP is quite sparsely populated and the main (and almost only) industry is farming. On this isolated coast, a bushfire ignited on the afternoon of 10 January 2005. It broke containment lines the following morning, often referred to as Black Tuesday or the Wangary fire. Due to the speed, complexity and ferocity of the fire most people had very little if any warning of the impending danger. Nine people perished: three women, four children and two fire fighters on a private unit. The Wangary fire burnt over 77 000 hectares of agricultural and forest lands, destroyed approximately 6 300 kilometres of fencing and over 46 000 livestock. The scale of the devastation had not been seen in South Australia since the Ash Wednesday fires of 1983.

During that fieldtrip, which took place in the first winter following the Wangary fire, I developed a strong desire to return to the LEP and conduct my own research project. At that point in time within the Australian research landscape, the role and decision-making of women during a disaster had been disturbingly neglected. Once I had completed a research proposal and acquired a scholarship to fund the study I returned to South Australia and lived for two months, in the spring of 2006, on a multi-generational farm in Greenpatch. That farming family had suffered extensive losses; one of two homes, over a thousand sheep, outbuildings and fences. My daily view from the kitchen sink, in the self-contained cottage, was a scarred landscape.

My qualitative study of the Wangary fire starkly revealed the gendered dimensions of bushfire. Back then the national bushfire safety policy, known colloquially as 'stay or go', stipulated that residents take responsibility for their own welfare in a bushfire on the terms prescribed by the fire agencies. I had posed the question: *Does the national 'stay or go' policy, the foundation of community bushfire response, address the information and decision needs of families and households where roles, decisions and responsibilities are part of an ever changing and complex social system?* The short answer was: 'No'. I submitted my Wangary fire thesis at the tail end of 2008. Less than two months later horrific fires ignited and burned across Victoria.

Black Saturday



Image 1: Photograph of the looming bushfire taken by an interviewee on 7 February 2009.

In the last week of January 2009, a heatwave descended on south-eastern Australia affecting “northern and eastern Tasmania, most of Victoria and adjacent border areas of New South Wales, and southern South Australia” (National Climate Centre, 2009, p. 2). Many locations across this vast geographic region set records for consecutive, highest daytime and overnight temperatures. The Bureau of Meteorology (BoM) identified two major episodes of exceptionally high temperatures: 28-31 January and 6-8 February, with very high temperatures also persisting in between these dates (National Climate Centre, 2009). In and across Melbourne, the capital city of Victoria, this heatwave led to widespread power outages and buckling rail lines. Train and tram services were at a standstill. Thousands of people were treated for heat related illness. Whilst there was a 77 per cent increase in the number of deaths reported to the State Coroner, it was not possible to provide a definitive death toll, with the number “calculated to be 374” people (Department of Human Services 2009, p. 15)

In the north-west of Victoria, in Hopetoun, the temperature peaked at 48.8°C (119.84°F), the highest temperature recorded in the State. On 7 February, the temperature in Melbourne climbed to 46.4°C (115.5°F). This was the hottest day in Melbourne since post-colonial records began in 1855. After years of drought this deadly heatwave, in conjunction with high winds (120 km/hr -

75mph) and very low humidity, created perfect weather conditions for “violent outbreaks” of bushfire (Pyne, 2012, p. 79). In the main fires were ignited by faulty electrical cables and arson.

When 173 men, women and children perished on 7 February 2009, Australia suffered its highest ever-recorded loss of life from bushfire. That day came to be known as Black Saturday. Over 2 000 homes were destroyed and in excess of 7 500 people were displaced across 78 townships. Behind these clinical statistics are permanently altered lives. The Black Saturday fires dramatically changed the physical and social landscape.

From the interviews I conducted back in 2006 with survivors of the Wangary fire, I was struck by their sense of connection to the natural environment. Relph (1986, p. 1) wrote: “To be human is to live in a world that is filled with significant places: to be human is to have and to know your place.” Whilst my earlier bushfire research had been anchored by family decision-making this Black Saturday work is concerned with the shifts that occur within the fundamental people-place relationship after catastrophic bushfire. In contrast to the elements of time, the life cycle and socioeconomics, the influence of gender is more subtle. Housing tenure, family composition, history of trauma and cultural background are a few of the many other considerations that can shed light on the complexities of navigating everyday life in a complicated post-disaster landscape.

This thesis explores the role place and home has in the lives of individuals, couples and families affected by bushfire. This work incorporates the perspectives of the homeless, or dispossessed, and the non-displaced. It engages with the complicated emotions that can manifest when domestic environments and the everyday practices that unfold within them are suddenly snatched away in traumatic circumstances. I engage with grief, the emotion “felt in the face of irretrievable loss” (Charmaz & Milligan, 2006, p. 518) and a multitude of embodied emotions that can reverberate through the lives of fire-affected people. Revisiting that South Australian domestic image of standing at the kitchen sink, looking out at the fire damaged landscape: this study is anchored in those everyday, repetitive and habitual routines and considers how survivors cope with complete devastation or otherwise to life as they knew it.

Place and home

This qualitative thesis examines the aftereffects of a catastrophic bushfire in order to explore and enhance our understanding of how people recreate a sense of self in a post-disaster space. This research contributes to expanding our knowledge of the complicated ‘emotional work’ and the often difficult decision-making triggered by living in or being displaced from a post-bushfire

landscape. Accepting that home is experienced and understood through all the senses (Pink, 2009) the destruction or disruption of that intimate space can be intensely distressing. This study, which is geographically situated in the Latrobe Valley, Central Gippsland, is about the deeply personal and complex repercussions that followed once the bushfire threat had subsided. It scrutinises the micro, the interviewees' lived experience of the day-to-day in the domestic setting. Considering the negative and positive effects of unanticipated change and profound loss is useful in the context of our changing climate and the forecasted increase in the frequency and severity of future disasters (including but not limited to bushfire). Within the macro of the policies and politics of local Council, State and Federal Governments, the Gippsland narratives emphasise where improvements might be made in the 'recovery' work that occurs in the aftermath of a mass crisis. How can we enhance our understanding of the needs of fire-affected residents beyond the short term? Between the micro and the macro lies the meso; the participants shared their observations of the shifts in the relationships and dynamics at neighbourhood and the local community levels. How do locally based, pre and/or post-bushfire tensions influence a survivor's sense of belonging and attachment to place on a personal level? Fundamental change, both for the better and worse occurred after the fires. Documenting instances of, and potential for, transformation at the micro, meso and macro levels is an important component of this study. It should be noted that there is much entanglement, within and across the micro, meso and macro and this mirrors the complexities of living in, or being estranged from, a post-disaster landscape.

Time

Throughout this thesis time is emphasised as an important factor for consideration, including but not limited to, how or whether participants were able to re-establish a 'sense of place' after Black Saturday, if in fact a 'sense of place' existed for them prior to the crisis. Riessman (2015, p. 1058), in her first person account of illness, maintained a "record of what happened" which was "one attempt to bring some order to a ruptured life..."

I feel compelled to comment on my personal relationship with time over the course of this research. When I began back in 2010 I experienced time in a conventional linear fashion ('clock time' and 'calendar time'). Referring back to my **Acknowledgements**, I did have 'peace of mind' and 'a quiet place.' I was thoroughly spoiled with time. Did I know how time-rich I was? Not until the birth of our son when my time for a substantial stretch completely evaporated. I gained new insights into the tensions of time. When our son was 18 months old my Dad told me he had been diagnosed with a terminal illness, at which point time felt suspended and I had no

words: the threat of his permanent absence hovered, like a black cloud, and my time with him was suddenly and too rapidly diminishing. There was not and there would never be enough time. After he died in May 2015 I entered into a foreign relationship with time. The winter of 2015 felt like it would never end. But, true to Frost who said that *it goes on*, spring did arrive. And so, through the gaining of a son and the loss of a father I have had to take substantially more time than was initially anticipated to complete this thesis.

Over the course of this research I've had to confront the meaning of places associated with my Dad, and the emotional value of his personal possessions, what do I cherish and why? I've had the painful luxury of sifting through Dad's special and not so special, items, whilst many of the Gippsland participants sifted through ash. I feel a little disturbed by the way that my life has seemingly and inadvertently mirrored some of the elements of this work; particularly the themes of loss, grief, memory and identity, but predominantly what Riessman refers to as "the rip in the fabric of my life in time" (2015, p. 1058). I often reflect on the place of this research in my life; we are intertwined. It has become a significant thread in the fabric of my personal narrative and constitutes a considerable slice of time. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 5) write: "The two narratives of participant and researcher become, in part, a shared narrative construction and reconstruction through the inquiry". I am aware that my deeply personal experience of impending and permanent loss has shaped how I have constructed meaning from, and the choices that I have made about, the Gippsland narratives. Because I have lingered so long with this project, which has anchored, haunted, nourished and drained me, I cannot recall how it was or felt to live without it always lurking and never truly letting me be. Once I am unshackled from this work I will, once again, feel the (forgotten) sensation of 'free time'. It will only be in the absence of this research that I will have the space and time to (re)discover who I am, knowing that I am not the person I was when I commenced. Just as many of the Gippsland participants had their life diverted and profoundly changed by an overwhelming event, I too have been transformed during and by this research process.

Structure of the thesis

My thesis comprises eight chapters:

Chapter One introduces and describes the origins of my interest in post-disaster research. My first exposure to a post-bushfire landscape on the LEP in South Australia was integral to this current interdisciplinary exploration of Black Saturday.

Chapter Two, the literature review embraces many fields of study. It begins with an historical appraisal of the contrasting Indigenous and European attitudes towards, and management of, bushfire. It establishes the inevitability of bushfire, as a current and future threat, due to the changing climate and our collective short-term memory and the need to learn more about the social and emotional ramifications that fire-affected residents confront. The focus of the chapter then shifts to assess the transferability of specific research derived from the disciplines of anthropology and material culture to the studies of disasters. Intimate domestic settings and personal possessions can contribute to sustaining an individual's 'sense of self'. Well-being and identity are bolstered by everyday practices and familiar, predictable sequences through space and time. Literature that engages with the non-linear sensation of time, on the one hand and on the other the power and harm of language are important elements of the chapter.

I provide details about my philosophical stance and therefore my methodological approach in **Chapter Three**. In the first part of the chapter I document the benefits and strengths of narrative inquiry and the methodology that drives this exploratory work. In the second part of the chapter I explain how I came to embrace the oeuvre of the philosopher Pierre Bourdieu and why I used his 'thinking tools' to assist me with making sense of the participants' 'sense-making'. Bourdieu's dedication to reflexivity and his writing on the power of language is a key influence of this study.

Embodied reflexive thinking saturates **Chapter Four**, which is all about the *doing*. The first part of the chapter focuses on the groundwork, including: conducting scoping interviews; determining my geographic focus; making connections and completing my fieldwork in the Latrobe Valley. I clarify how I recruited participants, what ethical implications I considered and why I chose to conduct in-depth, open-ended interviews with fire-affected residents. The second section of the chapter addresses the time-intensive task of analysing and interpreting the primary material. I explain how the five core concepts that provide the scaffolding for this thesis were extracted from the bushfire narratives. There is an emphasis in this chapter on the significance of the aural because narrative inquiry recognises subtleties, drawn not only from what is said, but *how* it is said.

The three chapters that follow are dedicated to the Gippsland narratives. The concepts of memory and identity loom large. **Chapter Five** focuses on the emotional attachment people develop with their homes, animals and possessions. The interviewees described intangible losses including the comfort and familiarity of home and the feelings and sensations that cannot be labelled or articulated. If rendered homeless, people are confronted by having to decide whether

to remain and rebuild, or relocate. **Chapter Six** delves into the disrupted people–place relationship and the sometimes emotionally and financially complicated decision-making around where to live. An important aspect of this chapter is documenting the instances of meaningful post-traumatic growth. **Chapter Seven** is comprised of the participants’ insights into the official ‘recovery’ response. I uncover what they learned and, where applicable, what they wished to pass on to future fire (or other disaster) affected people. Informal approaches to healing and experiences of secondary trauma, sometimes triggered by the ‘recovery’ response, are featured in this chapter.

Chapter Eight gathers and combines the essence of the preceding chapters to form an explanatory whole. This final chapter scrutinises the rich primary material through a lens that is comprised of the secondary literature and a selection of Bourdieu’s ‘thinking tools’. It advocates for the bureaucracy and ‘outsiders’ in general making more effort to grasp the knowledge that for some dispossessed and non-displaced people, the intensity of grief and homesickness may not diminish, over time. Direct interaction with, and perceptions of, the official ‘recovery’ response was found to have significant bearing on the wellbeing of fire-affected residents in the Latrobe Valley. This chapter draws on Albrecht’s (2006) concept of *solastalgia* and Bourdieu’s application of *hysteresis* to examine the flaws in the bureaucratic discourse during times of distress and estrangement. This chapter clarifies my contribution to the understanding of how people feel and how they go on with their lives after bushfire. I offer details about my perceptions of where the gaps in this study lie and how, with more investigation and scrutiny, these gaps can be addressed in the future.

Chapter Two

Digging into the literature: “loss of a stable ground”⁴

Bushfire research has primarily focused on the physical sciences to the detriment of cultural, or social, research. If a comprehensive and integrated approach to bushfire research is to be established, urgent priority should be given to the social sciences.

(Teague, Macleod and Pascoe 2010, p. 395)

Introduction

This chapter begins by delving into geological ‘deep time’. The place where we all reside, Earth, is steeped in instability and upheaval. The notion that short-term history is the most dangerous time-span (Clark, 2011) is informative for this post-bushfire narrative inquiry, which is anchored by the temporal. Understanding how the First Peoples of (what came to be) Australia lived with, rather than on, the land prior to the 1788 British invasion is relevant to how we arrived at the turbulent relationship between fire and people in the present day. Due to the Indigenous people and new settlers belonging to different universes I will not draw conclusions about the traumatic experiences of dispossession of the Indigenous populations.

This qualitative study aims to deepen understanding about the inevitable continuation of life after a disaster using an interdisciplinary approach. Oliver-Smith and Hoffman (2002, p. 12) refer to that phase, the process of reconstruction as when “people must traverse the difficult path between restoration and change”. Comprehending how people might navigate that difficult path, its ambiguous terrain, means grappling with the highly contested concepts of ‘place’ and ‘home’. Qualitative literature that theorises place and home is voluminous. This review features research sourced predominantly from the fields of material culture, anthropology and sociology that, in the main, follow ethnographic and phenomenological traditions. In addition to this, much of the research has its origins in countries with similar cultural attitudes or relationships to home ownership in Australia.

The rupturing of everyday life, the complicated repercussions that flow after catastrophic bushfires and how people navigate the distressing transition to their post-disaster life is the primary focus of this work. In order to enhance awareness about the emotional toll wrought by abrupt dispossession and estrangement, it is essential to consider how grief manifests in the post-

⁴ Clark (2012, p. 163) uses the loss of stable ground to describe the “impact of a physical upheaval”.

disaster space. An important aspect of this chapter, and the study as a whole, is identity. How a ‘sense of self’ evolves and is sustained over time in Western societies is tightly entwined with material culture. Objects, acquired over time can serve as reinforcement of the self in the present and into the future (Whitmore, 2001). Throughout this review, connections are made between the secondary literature and this Black Saturday research. Areas of study thought to be under-explored are explained towards the end of the chapter.

Fire, First People and ‘country’

The Earth has complex dynamics of its own, it constantly “rumbles, folds, cracks, erupts, irrupts” and is not designed for “our comfort or even our continuity” (Clark, 2012, p. xiv). There are three forms of fire across the Earth – natural, anthropogenic and industrial (Pyne, 2012). Nearly all landscapes with vegetative cover will sooner or later burn (Clark, 2012). Environmental historian Stephen Pyne (2012, p. 14) states that fire is:

A process integrally embedded into life on earth. Life created fire, life sustains fire, and life has progressively absorbed fire within its ecological webs...it has evolved hand in glove with the living world (Pyne, 2012, p. 14).

Clark, a geographer, refers to Australia as a “pyrophytic land” (2012, p. 163), alluding to plants that have adapted to and tolerate fire, which has been a constant presence in the nation’s ecology. South-eastern Australia, specifically the State of Victoria, is “arguably the worst in the world for socially disastrous fires” (Gill & Cary 2012 cited in Gill, Stephens & Cary, 2013, p. 439). Pyne (2012, p. 81) refers more broadly to south-eastern Australia as the “peculiar pyric vortex”. Over a span of 60 000 years the First People acquired “intimate and immense” knowledge of the natural environment (Watson, 2014, p. 76). Awareness of ‘deep time’, acknowledging the people who survived and did not survive in the preceding generations is precisely what Clark (2012) believes we should all strive for.

In most Indigenous cultures in Australia, land is regarded “not just as a physical resource, but also as a social resource: ‘country’ is the term used by many Indigenous people to refer to customary estates” (Davis & Langton, 2016, p. 1). ‘Country’ may include landscapes, seascapes and riverscapes, and may have one or more focal sacred sites (Davis & Langton, 2016). ‘Country’ is not just care and respect for the environment it is also an expression of emotional connectedness and kinship with the Earth. Anthropologist Bird Rose describes it as “nourishing terrain”:

People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country, and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or unhappy...*country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow*, with a consciousness, and a will toward life. Because of this richness, country is home, and peace; nourishment for body, mind and spirit...(Rose, 1996, p. 7, emphasis added).

The temporal and multi-sensory components of ‘country’ are striking; amounting to an embodied knowing.

Gammage details how inherited knowledge shaped the land management practices of the Aboriginal population and notes, “ecology explains what happens, the Dreaming why it happens” (2011, p. 133). Graham, an Indigenous philosopher (2008, p. 181, emphasis added) describes the land as a sacred entity:

...not property or real estate; it is the great mother of all humanity. The Dreaming is a combination of meaning (about life and all reality), and an action guide to living. The two most important kinds of relationship in life are, firstly, those between *land and people* and, secondly, those *amongst people themselves*, the second being always contingent upon the first. The land, and how we treat it, is what determines our humanness. Because land is sacred and must be looked after, the relation between people and land becomes the template for society and social relations. Therefore all meaning comes from land.

Significantly, this ‘action guide to living’ explains the ways that Indigenous people revere the land; there is no reference to ownership or emotional investment in material culture and this absence warrants reflection. The Dreaming, and ‘country’, does not revolve around humans; people are linked to ecosystems and all the elements are interconnected. Clark (2012, p. 207) guards against romanticising Indigenous people the world over, living in perfect harmony with their environment: “People caught up in the ongoing turbulence of earth processes do not always ‘manage’, and cannot be expected to do so”. Pyne echoes this, within the context of fire: “We cannot know exactly what to do. We stumble. We make mistakes” (2004, p. 191).

Langton (2003, p. 85) explains that the Europeans were confronted in 1788 by a managed environment:

The biogeographical history of Australia determined the range of plant and animal species that would occur within the region; but, to some extent, the balance and distribution of species had been altered, not only by climate change, but also by Aboriginal impacts. Most significant of these was the human use of fire as a management tool in a fire-prone continent, resulting in seasonal mosaic patterns across landscapes that prevented destructive, hot wildfires.

Colonial history is a major contributing factor to the “contemporary fire scene” (Pyne, 2001, p. 1005). The landscape, “intrinsically fire-prone” was “largely emptied” due to “disease-driven demographic collapse, wars and forced relocations” (Pyne, 2001, p. 1005). The removal of Indigenous people meant that land use and fire practices were in the hands of institutions. Pyne also refers to massive overgrazing and the creation of parks and reserves as causal factors (Pyne, 2001, p. 1005). The arrival of white settlers marked the beginning of a traumatic rupturing, on an incomprehensible scale, between First Peoples’ and their *nourishing terrain*. Graham (2008, p. 187) emphasises that, despite westernisation, Aboriginal people’s identity is essentially “always embedded in land and defined by their relationships to it and to other people”.

Picking up the temporal thread, Memmott and Long write about Indigenous and European value systems and the ways that time is *felt*:

With colonial contact a new construct of time entered the life of Aboriginal people, that of Western time—a time concept linked to diurnal and seasonal rhythms (two segments of 12 hours, the calendar year), and broken down into sub-units to permit quantification and measurement. The imposition on Aboriginal people of Western time structures in Mission, pastoral, agricultural and mining settings, disrupted traditional Aboriginal time structures. However, despite this new system of relating to time, natural time influences still prevail for many groups in the contemporary situation (Memmott & Long, 2002, p. 50).

Anton and Lawrence (2014, p. 453), in their research located in south-west Western Australia make an important point: “...Indigenous Australians have ancestral ties to the land which are very different bonds to the ones measured here in relation to home and local area”. Similarly, this Black Saturday study acknowledges ancestral ties to place and explicitly situates this work within the westernised experience of ‘sense making’ after bushfire. Pyne (2012, p132) sums up the ways that humans and fires are intertwined:

The character of future fires will depend on the character of the landscape, and that will depend on the character of the people who must choose what the place should be and what they can or can’t do (or do by accident) regarding that decision.

Grief

The colonial time concept, referred to above, is relevant to the ways that grief is constructed in modern society. Grief, commonly associated with death, is “the emotion felt in the face of irretrievable loss” (Charmaz & Milligan, 2006, p. 517). In Western societies, due to that association of death, grief is viewed as a negative emotion. Charmaz (1980, 1997, cited in Charmaz & Milligan, 2006, p. 532) argues that “radical individualism in Western society precludes us from seeing or acknowledging the depth and meanings of our attachments”. In her analysis of three memoirs of grief, Prodromou (2012, p. 58) avoids the polarity of “absolute recovery” and “irretrievable loss” arriving at “a space somewhere in between”. Prodromou (2012, p. 72) engages with the ambiguities of grief and highlights the benefits of documenting instances of loss that are not “didactic, but purposely open ended”. Charmaz and Milligan (2006, p. 520) emphasise the non-linearity of grief; embodied emotions triggered by loss, such as anger, sadness, shock, sorrow, disbelief, self-pity, ebbs and flows. Grief, viewed as non-routine and irrational is then minimised and bureaucratised in Western societies (Charmaz & Milligan, 2006). These insights into the tensions and misunderstandings of what constitutes grief help account for the mismatch between the post-disaster timescales of the macro and the micro in this bushfire study. Charmaz and Milligan (2006, p. 531) refer to Doka’s concept of disenfranchised grief as “perhaps the major sociological contribution to the scholarship on grief”.

Disenfranchised grief occurs when loss cannot be acknowledged and the sorrow is hidden. Culturally specific notions of grief, how it is enforced and specified, constrain and contribute to disenfranchised grief. Disenfranchised grief is fundamental to the research of Robinson, who identifies “how grief over home experiences *continues* to shape the lived experience of homelessness [for young people] in both negative and positive ways” (2005, p. 48, original emphasis). Robinson strives to “undo the stiffness of the category of ‘homeless’” referring to it as:

...a state of being, of being grief-stricken, of feeling dispersed, fragmented, inconsolable. Beside one’s self. Homelessness was a fear, a suffering, an anger, a pleading for peace. It could not be outrun because it was inside.

For the participants in Robinson’s (2005, p. 52) research, grief over past home experiences was “lived in terms of the continuing negative relationships with new homes they established”. The insights generated by Robinson’s work are highly relevant to the complexities of re-establishing home in post-disaster settings. Crucially, Robinson (2011, p. 57) engages with the linkages, what she calls “grief-stricken relations”, between place, body and self. This intersects with the three

key dimensions inherent in the concept of ‘home’, the physical, social and emotional, as identified by Milligan (2005, p. 2117).

Environmental hazards and disasters

Reflecting on four decades of visiting scenes of disaster and writing about them, sociologist Erikson (2014, p. xviii) questions the neat categories of ‘natural’ and ‘human-made’. He suggests that what makes events, such as earthquakes and tsunamis; ‘disastrous’ “has less to do with their ferocity than what lies before them” (Erikson, 2014, p. xviii). An earthquake registering at the top of the Richter scale will not be called a ‘disaster’ if it is active in uninhabited space. For a natural or human-made event to be considered a ‘disaster’ it must collide with a “site shaped by human hands” (Erikson, 2014, p. xviii). Clark strengthens this sentiment when he writes about humans tuning into “the inner logic of categories” whilst tuning out, or turning away from nature; “any kind of encounter between objects or elements in which no humans are present ceases to be of interest to critical observers” (Clark, 2012, p. 85). Human geographer Shaw ruminates on the word ‘events’: “Volcanoes bubble and boil, oceans heave and toil, nuclear bombs flatten cities, and protestors topple brutal dictators. These events can tear apart the *fabric of sense and habit* in the world” (2012, p. 613, emphasis added). Shaw uses the word ‘geo-event’ to name the “transformation of a world – from galaxies to nation states to ecosystems – by inexistent objects and the forces they unleash” (2012, p. 613). A common word in the disaster literature is incoherence. Clark (2011, p. 97) reflects on how his ideas were “tested, twisted and wrenched into new shapes and intensities by the Indian Ocean Tsunami” which killed over 230 000 people across more than a dozen countries. Rupture on such a mammoth scale is inexplicable; the lack of consensus on the concept of disaster in the tragic aftermath is inconsequential.

Handmer and Dovers approach the topic of disasters as “strategic policy and institutional challenges that demand ‘increasing political space’ and not just as events that impose themselves on our communities” (2013, p. 2). The interaction of climate through weather with human activity or assets can produce disaster (Handmer & Dovers, 2013, p. 18). Disaster events are not always clear and recognisable; extreme events do not necessarily result in disasters and disasters do not need extreme events, natural or otherwise (Handmer & Dovers, 2013, p. 15). There is no precise definition of disaster. This lack of consensus on the concept of disaster, within disaster research and management, frustrates anthropologist Oliver-Smith (2015, p. 38) who describes disasters as “totalising” and “tragic” events. According to Handmer & Dovers (2013, p. 11)

irrespective of the arguments of “intellectuals or policy-makers” the “global media epitomized by CNN, is likely to be the ultimate definer of ‘disaster’”. Disasters, whether natural or created by human error or design, do not discriminate. They occur frequently and produce widespread implications in countries across all four levels of Human Development Indicators (HDI).⁵

Handmer and Dovers (2013) observe that numerous definitions of disaster are generated by how these events are perceived: an investment opportunity (investment bank); evidence of climate change (scientists); research opportunity (students/academics); livelihoods (non-government organisation). Within the political sphere, governments latch on to disasters as an “opportunity to legitimize themselves, to parade their power by mobilizing resources and to empathize with the victims by offering sympathy and assistance” (Handmer & Dovers, 2013, p. 11). It is evident that disasters are a complex melting pot of social, political and economic phenomena.

The Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) state that “4.2 billion, or more than half the worldwide population, were potentially exposed to natural disasters in 2017” (CRED, 2018). CRED defines disaster as a:

...situation or event that overwhelms local capacity, necessitating a request at the national or international level for external assistance; an unforeseen and often sudden event that causes great damage, destruction and human suffering (CRED, 2018).

Countries with higher HDIs experience greater gross economic costs yet the proportional impact on the economies of lower ranked nations is typically far greater (Handmer & Dovers, 2013). Natural or environmental hazards are now “manifestly connected with, and magnified by, human ambition and prowess” (Gleeson, 2013, p. 5). Looming over Earth and all the people residing on it is the temporality of environmental threats. Rapid population growth, relentless plundering of natural resources and a lack of coordinated action on the changing climate will result in the planet being uninhabitable for our species. Over two decades ago sociologist Adam noted that “global problems need globally coordinated action which is difficult to achieve and extremely slow” (1993, p. 401). Adam recognised that “environmental damage will become intolerable long before those natural resources are exhausted: we won’t be running out of resources but out of time” (Adam, 1993, p. 406). Some traditional societies such as the First Peoples adapted slowly to environmental change, creating an ecologically sustainable economy over millennia. In

⁵ The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) compiles global data that gives an overview of development across the world, looking at long-term trends across multiple dimensions (not just economic) for every nation. There are four levels of HDI: very high (59), high (53), medium (39) and low (38) – the bracketed numbers indicate where each of the 189 countries fit. Very high human development countries are the “biggest contributors to climate change, with average carbon dioxide emissions per capital of 10.7 tonnes, compared with 0.3 tonne in low human development countries” (UNDP, 2018, p. 6).

contrast modern industrial Australia has through dominance and control over the natural environment, created rapid change over a span of 230 years. Oliver-Smith writes that disaster risk and social vulnerability are “in large measure the products of historical and existing processes of social and economic development” (2015, p. 46). Globalist capitalist expansion accelerated after the end of the Second World War is “straining the limits of both human adaptability and the resilience of nature” (Holling, 1994 cited in Oliver-Smith, 2015, p. 42). The costs of current consumption can be, and often are, transferred “in time as well as space – the discounting of the future by governments and other power groups is one of the interesting characteristics of modern societies” (Handmer & Dovers, 2009, p. 197).

Bushfire

The tendency for fires to be named in a distinct way has been noted by Pyne:

Australia has managed to fill up the weekday calendar with the names of famous conflagrations: Black Sunday (1926), Black Monday (1865), Red Tuesday (1898), Ash Wednesday (1983), Black Thursday (1851), Black Friday (1939) and Black Saturday (2009), and have had to find other monikers (for example, Black Christmas, 2002) to keep the chronicle going. Surely large fires had happened before the First Fleet arrived at Botany Bay in January 1788, but the melancholy roster does not reflect merely the arrival of scribes prepared to write down what had gone unremarked previously – the tree that burned in the woods unseen – they testify to the changing circumstances that came from the evolving character of settlement (2012, p. 80).

The 1939 Black Friday fires in Victoria were a catalyst. In terms of loss of life (71 people) and loss of property, this disaster was, at that point, one of the worst in the nation’s recorded history. Close to five million acres were scorched; soils were eroded and water catchments were contaminated for years following the crisis. In response, a Royal Commission was convened with Judge Leonard Stretton selected to lead the inquiry into the causes of the fires and the measures taken to prevent the fires and to protect life and property. Stretton made seven major recommendations to improve forest and fire management and to help prevent events like the Black Friday fires from occurring again. This desire to prevent fire is consistently articulated in the immediate aftermath of severe or catastrophic fires, contradicting the flammability of the landscape and the ubiquitous nature of fire. Stretton made reference to the naivety of Europeans:

Men who had lived their lives in the bush went their ways in the shadow of dread expectancy. But though they felt the imminence of danger they could not tell that it was to be far greater than they could imagine. *They had not lived long enough.* The experience of the past could not guide them to an understanding of what might, and did, happen. And so it was that, when millions of acres of the forest were invaded by

bushfires which were almost State-wide, there happened, because of great loss of life and property, the most disastrous forest calamity the State of Victoria has known” (Victoria, Parliament, 1939, p. 5, emphasis added).

Sweeping changes were made including the official sanctioning of controlled burning. Seventy years later the Black Saturday bushfires demonstrated that technological advances are no match for an angry Earth. The Black Saturday fires occurred as a result of human error, neglect or acts of arson. Whilst the climatic conditions were extreme, very few of the fires were ignited ‘naturally’. Hansen and Griffiths (2012, p. 161) identify a cultural flaw, which is equivalent to collective amnesia:

We seem unable to carry the memory of the ferocity of nature from one event to the next. One thing that we never seem to learn from history is that nature can overwhelm culture.

They describe the Australian bush as a “dynamic evolving biological force with regenerative purpose in the midst of which *humans have the craving and courage to live*” (Hansen & Griffiths, 2012, p. 32, emphasis added). This craving and courage is at the core of Cox’s bushfire research. Cox investigated the loss of sense of place in a Victorian coastal community in the wake of the Ash Wednesday bushfires. For her doctoral thesis, titled *Treading Lightly: An Ecology of Healing*, Cox (1996) interviewed 40 people including disaster relief workers who survived the bushfires of 1983. Her major focus, described as the “most dominant and pervasive in the fire narratives,” is “the cosmological view of humans as connected to their environment, to spaces and places” (Cox, 1996, p. 75). The “relationship that many people have in this area with the natural environment: the bushland; the ocean; the flora and fauna” was a key theme which featured in the interviews recorded in 1993, ten years after the event (Cox, 1996, p. 210). Cox (1996) reported links, articulated by some of the interviewees, between the regeneration of the landscape and personal healing. The insights into the relationship between people and their natural environment are particularly useful for this Gippsland study. In a journal paper Cox stated she was intrigued as to why people, who can afford to leave, choose “to remain in a place where they have experienced great trauma, and which remains just as vulnerable on a hot summer’s day as it was at the time of that terrible fire” (Cox & Holmes, 1996, p. 63). She, and her co-author, wrote that the answer

...appears to lie in the relationship that these people had and have with their chosen environment, both in terms of their built and natural environments – the bushland, the flora and fauna, and the ocean. The study suggests that within their chosen place, they

found healing, and their relationship to their chosen place was instrumental in that process (Cox & Holmes, 2000, p. 63).

Cox's work is distinguished by broadening the focus from the interior domestic space to encompass the wider natural environment.

Place

The concept of place appears at first glance, "to be obvious and common sense" (Cresswell, 2004, p. 50). Cresswell writes that at the heart of place "lies the notion of a meaningful segment of geographical space" and the geographical definition is described as "locations with meaning" (Cresswell, 2008, p. 134). A significant body of academic research is dedicated to the study of the role of place in identity. According to Rose (1995 cited in Cox, 2006, p. 161), the meanings imbued in place are varied, and they play a central role in the formation of identity.

Milligan (2003, p. 383) defines *place attachment* as "an emotional link to a physical site given meaning through social interaction". An "individual's memories of a place and an individual's expectations for future experiences in relation to that place" are the two interwoven components that comprise place attachment (Milligan, 1998 cited in Milligan, 2003 p. 383).

Anton and Lawrence (2014, p. 452) observe that, depending on the particular components being investigated, "researchers have tended to create their own measures of place attachment, resulting in a plethora of indices". Furthermore, the lack of clarity about what is being measured "can make it hard to generalise from one study to another" (Anton and Lawrence, 2014, p. 452). Some of the other key place-related concepts that are peppered within and across the literature include: place identity; rootedness; sense of place; place dependence; or place satisfaction (Lewicka, 2011, p. 208). Place gives meaning to people's lives and attachment to place fundamentally contributes to wellbeing (Fullilove, 1996). Methodical research that enhances our understanding of the nature of our emotional connections to place through tragedy and loss is needed (Manzo, 2003). The ways that some people's sense of belonging is obtained by the exclusion of others is "an untidy aspect of place attachment that has been largely ignored" (Manzo, 2003, p. 55). When attachment to place is abruptly severed identity discontinuity can follow (Milligan, 2003).

Home, identity, life cycle and memory

Across the academic literature it is common for home to be singled out as the 'place' of greatest personal significance – "the central reference point of human existence" (Relph, 1986, p. 20).

Saunders and Williams (1988, p. 81) describe the home as “one of the most basic institutions in contemporary western societies”. Dupuis and Thorns (1998, p. 24) write about the ideology of home ownership and how it has been “a central component shaping policies and practices in such countries as Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Canada”. According to Harvey (1978, cited in Blunt & Dowling, 2006, p. 11), home:

...plays a role in the ideological reproduction of capitalism. The ownership of housing, in particular, encouraged commitment to, and identification with, capitalist values.

Utilising research from countries with similar cultural attitudes to home ownership is thought to enhance understanding of the role home plays in the Victorian bushfire afflicted communities. This chapter contains literature from capitalist countries that have seen an uptake in home ownership since the expansion of the middle classes in the 1950s and 1960s (Mallett, 2004, p. 66), namely: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom (UK) and to a lesser extent, the United States of America (USA). It is in these societies where governments have “actively promoted the conflation of house, home and family as part of a broader ideological agenda aimed at increasing economic efficiency and growth” that housing tenure has “increasingly featured in the meaning of home” (Mallett, 2004, p. 66).

Saunders and Williams (1988, p. 88) assert that in Anglo-Saxon culture the physical ideal is that of the “detached house” and the legal ideal is “owner-occupation...both of which emphasise household autonomy”. Owner occupation evokes distinct feelings and beliefs – of security, continuity and control. This includes; how long to live in a home, what pets to own and what alterations or improvements might be made, which renting in Australian society cannot provide. Anton and Lawrence (2014, p. 458) contend that the longer a person can stay in an area the “greater the chance for it to become part of their identities which will increase the desire to continue residing there”. They comment on the short-term leases so common in Australia, which means that residents “may not stay long enough in their homes for them to be assimilated into their identity structures” (Anton & Lawrence 2014, p. 458).

Geographers, Blunt and Dowling (2006, p. 2), theorise the emotional and embodied experience of home. They note that the perplexity surrounding definitions of ‘home’ is due to the distinct way that each scholar, guided by their discipline, defines and understands ‘home’. Black captures the slipperiness when he writes that the concept of ‘home’ is:

...intimately linked to concepts of *identity and memory* as much as territory and place. Home can be made, re-made, imagined, remembered or desired; it can refer as much to beliefs, customs or traditions as physical places or buildings. Most important, as a

concept it is something that is subject to constant reinterpretation and flux, just as identities are renegotiated (2002, p. 126, emphasis added).

The word ‘memory’ in the above quote implies the ‘passage of time’, which is key to the understanding and application of attachment to place and ‘home’ in this post-disaster research. Memory, acquired in place and over time, incorporates the various stages along the life cycle and how perceptions can evolve and change as we are exposed to, and live in, different places. Després (1991, p. 98) emphasises that home “...is also a temporal process that can only be experienced along time”. Meanings of home are multifaceted and complex due to the specific temporal and social contexts of the ‘meaning making’ (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998). Dupuis and Thorns (1998, p. 31) reinforce how the sense of permanency associated with home “...is neither naturally occurring nor instant but is created over time. This creation is most often conceptualised as ‘making a house into a home’.” The extension of that notion is, with the passage of time comes a deeper sense of belonging to the home, and more broadly, to the exterior environment. This temporal element also overlaps with mobility, the frequency, or infrequency, of uprooting and relocating.

Theories of home, and how they are linked to identity, are essential to understanding how disaster-affected people cope, or struggle to cope, with their new reality. Easthope (2004) writes about the benefits, for housing researchers, of understanding ‘home’ as a significant place. Much of what Easthope (2004) discusses can be useful for disaster scholars. She writes:

In understanding a person’s connection with their home, then, we go some way towards understanding their social relations, their psychology and their emotions and we can begin to understand their ‘lived experiences’ (Easthope, 2004, p. 135).

Easthope warns against “...rigid definitions of ‘home’. Since ‘home’ is a term imbued with personal meanings, different people are likely to understand ‘home’ to mean different things at different times and in different contexts” (2004, p. 135). This helps explain the fluidity of ‘home’ and the futility of seeking out or settling on a static definition. Easthope maintains that the literature on identity and place, “combined with the notion of home as a particular kind of place, provides a framework for addressing *connections between people’s home-places and their psychological well-being*” (2004, p. 136, emphasis added). Easthope’s argument resonates with, and is relevant to, the professional workers who form policy and control budgets (at the macro level) for recipients who are navigating the overwhelming and uncertain post-disaster landscape (at the micro level). Easthope reinforces the need to “understand that people often make economic decisions *not as purely rational actors*” (Easthope, 2004, p. 136, emphasis added).

This issue, the intersection or tension between financial and emotional decision-making, is a prominent theme in this post-bushfire narrative inquiry and is analysed in detail in Chapter Eight.

Home, write Blunt and Dowling (2006) in their book by the same name, is more than a physical site in which we live. Home is also “an idea and an imaginary that is imbued with feelings” (Blunt & Dowling, 2006, p. 2) and these may be feelings of belonging, desire and intimacy (as, for instance, in the phrase ‘feeling at home’), but can also be feelings of fear, violence and alienation” (Blunt & Varley, 2004 cited in Blunt & Dowling 2006, p. 2). In this way, home can be a peaceful retreat from the outside world and it can also be a site of oppression or in the case of many women and some men a place of unpaid, and seemingly endless domestic work. While clock-time dominates the world of work and the global economy, “the great majority of the world’s people function in the shadows of the time economy of money” (Adam, 2006, p. 124). Adam explains how the capitalist scheme of things renders particular groups of people ‘invisible’:

Children and the elderly, the unemployed, carers the world over and subsistence farmers of the majority world inhabit the shadowlands of un- and undervalued time. Women dwell there in unequal numbers. Their time does not register on the radar of commodified time (Adam, 2006, p. 124).

Saunders and Williams assert that the “key dimensions which differentiate the meaning of the home between different household members are gender and age” (1998, p. 85). Feminist viewpoints abound in the literature on home for it has long been recognised that “home is a key site in the oppression of women...As a symbolic representation, home serves to remove women from the ‘real’ world of politics and business” (Blunt & Dowling, 2006, p. 15). Blunt and Dowling highlight the “paucity of research on masculinity and home” and that the focus in many societies on the breadwinner/provider role for men, “makes it difficult for them to feel comfortable at home during unemployment or retirement” (2006, p. 113). This point is pertinent to disaster-affected people, particularly men who are often unable to work or whose livelihood has been destroyed as a result of the rupturing event.

It is widely acknowledged that gender is critical to understanding home; ethnicity, sexuality and household composition are also important. In the literature, the presence of children and their lack of agency in relation to home-making practices has been noted: “Suburban homes are spaces of parental control and are spatially demarcated along generational lines” (Blunt & Dowling, 2006, p. 115). Blunt and Dowling (2006) remark on how home can be constricted for

the very elderly or frail who are ‘ageing in place’, down to one particular room or a single piece of furniture (such as a favourite armchair): for those who are housebound “home becomes their world” (Blunt & Dowling, 2006, p. 114). Yet simply by gazing through a window, it is possible to remain or feel connected to the world beyond the front door.

One point that is made by Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff (1983, p. 66), which also features in much of the literature on place, is that the environmental stability that contributes to place-identity can lead the individual to believe “in his or her own continuity over time”. Emphasis, they write, should be on change rather than constancy as both the self and self-identity are always shifting incrementally or suddenly over the course of the life cycle (Proshansky et al., 1983). People need to adapt to the changing physical and social world; our sense of self is not fixed (Proshansky et al., 1983, p. 59). This ties in neatly with the writing of Clark (2012), cited at the opening of this chapter, who explores human frailty and the volatility of the Earth. The challenge is how to establish a meaningful connection to place and/or our home whilst being mindful of the fragility and inevitability of change or potential for disruption or dispossession. This is particularly relevant to residents who live in high bushfire or earthquake/flood/cyclone prone locations.

In her early work, Cooper (1976, p. 447)⁶ scrutinised the notion of ‘house-as-self’, which “goes to part of the way to explain...the extreme resistance of most people to any change in its basic form”. In her book, published later in her academic career, Marcus (2006) wrote a chapter titled, ‘The lost house: disruptions in the bonding with home’. She noted that those of us who are fortunate enough to own or rent a home that “fits our needs may never realise the depth of its emotional significance until we lose it, through divorce, natural disaster, or old age” (Marcus, 2006, p. 219). This notion of lacking true insight into what makes home special or comfortably familiar until it is disrupted is echoed throughout the literature on place and home.

Complications aside, Marcus (2006, p. 182, emphasis in original) writes:

A critical issue to bear in mind is that all of us, consciously or unconsciously, consider our home to be a **refuge**. It is **the** place in the world where we can recoup from the vagaries of the outside world.

As documented earlier, home is not universally experienced as a refuge but the words of Marcus (2006) do resonate strongly with this qualitative research into dispossession, estrangement and transformation. Setting aside the documented contradiction and confusion about what constitutes

⁶ Please note that Cooper becomes Cooper Marcus part way through her writing career. She is listed under Cooper and then later Marcus in the References.

‘home,’ the most fitting description, for the purpose of this study, is a sentence constructed by Dupuis and Thorns:

Home is an encompassing category that links together a material environment, in this case the physical structure of a house, with a deeply emotional set of meanings to do with permanence and continuity (1998, p. 30).

Possessions

It is imperative to take personal possessions into account when engaging with fire narratives. Casey writes that: “Material things not only frequently constitute the specific content of places and memories alike, but by their special memorability they draw memory and place together in a quite significant way” (1987, p. 205). As Casey noted, without the material things there is no tangible reminder that connects us to the special or ordinary memories associated with the places and relationships in time. In his phenomenological study on memory, Casey uses the term ‘reminiscintia’ to refer to objects that “act as inducers of reminiscence” (Casey, 1987, p. 110).

Evaluating the significance of objects after bushfires is important in the context of personal identity and decision-making about place and belonging. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton write in their book about the meaning of things:

To understand what people are and what they might become, one must understand what goes on between people and things. *What things are cherished, and why, it should become part of our knowledge of human beings.* Yet it is surprising how little we know about what things mean to people. By and large social scientists have neglected a full investigation of the relationship between people and objects (1981, p. 1, emphasis added).

To establish what objects meant to people and why, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton conducted interviews with over 300 residents, across three generations, from 82 families in Chicago, a major metropolitan area in the USA. The focus of their research was restricted to items contained within the interviewee’s home. Consistent with the earlier discussion of home, the investigators considered home, as “not only a material shelter but also a shelter for those things that make life meaningful” (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981, p.139). Their aim was to establish and explore the person-object relationship (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). What is striking about this study, completed (at the time of writing) over 35 years ago, is the depth of emotion that some of their participants displayed as they articulated, or struggled to articulate, the meaning of their special objects. Two examples follow:

When asked what it would mean not to have the thing [a picture of her deceased brother that hung in the front hall], she broke down and started to cry. When she calmed down, she said: 'I am sorry, I couldn't answer that' (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981, p. 67).

Although he [a grandfather] emphasized that he is 'not materialistic' and 'wouldn't cry' if he lost the photo [of himself and his two brothers] or any of his objects, the actual presence of the picture and the experience it recalls, upon reflection, were enough to bring this man to tears (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981, p. 68).

For several of their participants the *prospect* of not being able to access or engage with their meaningful possession/s was enough to trigger strong emotions during the interview.

Significantly, the two participants quoted above both identified, and became emotional about, a family picture or photograph. Their embodied response to hypothetical absence, or loss, was almost too painful for some of the Chicago participants to contemplate, effectively revealing the intensity of emotions that disaster survivors might face. These special possessions are a visual link to family history and can trigger, or re-awaken, nostalgic childhood memories. Douglas (2010, p. 89) states that photographs are offered 'as a tool of authentication...a memory prompt and is a tangible guarantee of the truth of the recollection'. The very presence of a photograph, displayed or stored, can be comforting and elicit emotional and sensual responses (inclusive of sounds, smells, textures and so on) as past situations are re-lived or brought back into the present. Photographs are:

...part of the material with which we make sense of our wider world. They are objects which take their place amongst the other objects which are part of our personal and collective past, part of the detailed and concrete existence with which we gain some control over our surroundings (Holland, 1991 cited in Douglas, 2010, p. 45).

Essentially, photographs can contribute towards a sense of wellbeing or ontological security.

The role of photographs in the creation of 'home' ties in with an observation made by Marcus (2006, p. 72), whose work was quoted earlier in her book, *House as a mirror of self: exploring the deeper meaning of home*, that analyses the bonds between people and place:

Unless we stop and consciously reflect upon it, most of us are scarcely aware of how much our homes, as well as being functional settings for daily life, are containers for collections of memorabilia. Objects, pictures, furniture, posters, ornaments – all remind us of significant people, places, phases, experiences, and values in our lives.

It was during the interview that participants in the study conducted by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) had their awareness of what they valued heightened. They were consciously processing how they would feel if their special possession/s were removed from

their lives. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) believe that the position along the life cycle of the interviewee played a key role in determining the level of emotional attachment to a possession. This finding arises regularly in the literature on home and possessions.

In his book chapter, titled ‘The refurbishment of memory’, Marcoux (2001, p. 70) explores “the relationship between memory, material culture and mobility”. In order to gain an understanding of the role played by possessions in the lives of renters in the city of Montreal, Canada, Marcoux (2001) examined and analysed what people take with them when they move (voluntary or involuntary displacement). He questions what are the things that matter, why and how do they come to matter? (Marcoux, 2001, p. 70) Moving, forces people to think about their objects, which can give rise to strong emotions (Marcoux, 2001). The sifting through and sorting of possessions, some still packed up from previous moves, is, essentially a form of “memory excavation” (Marcoux, 2001, p. 78). Moving can trigger an opportunity to be liberated from objects and memories that are grounded in past and current relationships (both positive and negative) or reinforce, through fear of future regret, ongoing captivity to ‘stuff’. One participant (how many are in the study is not revealed) ended up “keeping things for fear of not doing so” and by keeping almost all her possessions, Marcoux felt that the things had “become cumbersome companions” for her. (Marcoux, 2001, p. 77). Marcoux states that the difficulty of separating oneself from an object is not necessarily all about the severing of the emotional connection but more about “the difficulty of determining what to begin with, where to start or which priorities to put forth” (Marcoux, 2001, p. 80). In addition to the internal conflict is the potential for external tensions with other family members (if you don’t live alone). As with the research conducted by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981), Marcoux found that life cycle was a significant factor; he emphasised the grief that can be triggered in the elderly by the necessity to downsize into a residence or equivalent form of supported accommodation. But the “contraction of the material environment” is not always terrible, in fact it can be experienced as “a relief: less things need to be remembered, dusted, managed or worried about” (Marcoux, 2001, p. 81). Featured in the chapter are two older people, one is a 71-year-old man (living in a house he built 33 years earlier) and the other is an 89-year-old woman (it is unclear if she is/was a renter). They are moving or have moved on their terms at a time of their choosing; they have control. If in the act of moving, people can review or order relationships – “deciding which ones to reinforce, which ones to abandon or put on hold” – what then is the sensation for those who are not fortunate enough, through circumstances beyond their control (such as war, domestic violence, dementia or disaster), to decide when to move and what items if any, will accompany

them (Marcoux, 2001, p. 83)? The research undertaken by Marcoux on the often highly stressful but potentially cathartic act of moving, highlights the complexity of the relationships people can develop with their possessions and touches on the possible detrimental impacts for other family members. He maintains that it is through the act of sifting through and sorting out, deciding what will be retained, that the object gains value:

By abandoning this thing, by getting rid of that one, a person confers more value on the objects retained. She or he confers it some importance it did not possess at the outset. The production of rarity, hence of value, is indeed the corollary of the sorting out of things (Marcoux, 2001, p. 84).

Marcoux's findings are reminiscent of the work of Tuan, a key figure in human geography who writes "objects anchor time" (2001, p. 187) and when people "deliberately change their environment and feel they are in control of their destiny, they have little cause for nostalgia" (Tuan, 2001, p. 195). Objects or mementoes can remind us of people, places and events that are of particular importance to us. The act of moving house, where decisions to retain or discard possessions are required, is essentially "the active management of one's own externalized memory" (Miller, 2001, p. 8). The complexity of our emotional connection to personal possessions, within the context of this research, will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters Five and Eight.

Miller, an anthropologist, has conducted a vast amount of research on material culture (2001, 2008 & 2010).⁷ As editor of, *Home possessions: material culture behind closed doors*, featuring the previously discussed chapter by Marcoux, he describes the content of the chapters as "ethnographic encounters that took place behind the closed doors of domestic homes" (Miller, 2001, p. 1). Miller maintains that by studying the "fine-grained relationship between people and the material culture of the home...leads to powerful insights into the societies in question" (Miller, 2001, p. 15). Miller is passionate about contemporary anthropology, "the discipline which tries to engage with the minutiae of everyday life while retaining a commitment to understanding humanity as a whole" (Miller, 2008, p. 6). He emphasises the value of research that occurs in the homes of participants for home is the "place where most of what matters in people's lives takes place" (Miller, 2001, p. 3). *Home possessions*, "concentrates on directly observing the processes by which a home and its inhabitants transform each other" (Miller, 2001, p. 2).

⁷ There are many other publications on material culture by Daniel Miller. These are the three key texts used in this study.

Living possessions: livestock

When warnings are issued about an impending geo-event the welfare of animals is a primary focus for many people. Research into the Wangary fire in South Australia confirmed that farmers took great risks to influence the rate of livestock survival (Proudley, 2008). Underinsurance, or the absence of it, was a major factor in decision-making during the fires: so too was the fear of overseeing the loss of irreplaceable bloodlines, a legacy of generations (Proudley, 2008).⁸

Convery, Bailey, Mort and Baxter (2005) completed an Action Research (AR) study, over a two-year timeframe, to assess the impacts of the 2001 Foot-and-mouth-disease (FMD) epidemic in the United Kingdom on livestock-farming and livestock-non-farming relations. The researchers share individual stories behind this crisis, which instigated the destruction of between six and ten million farm animals (cows, sheep and pigs). Drawing on the holistic concept of *lifestyles*, the researchers explore the interrelationship between people and place, “as a way of framing the social, cultural and economic interactions that occur for people across the landscape” (Convery et al, 2005, p. 101). Livestock, for the farming families in Cumbria where the study took place, was part of everyday routines and contributed substantially to sense of self. The scale of the killing as a result of the FMD epidemic:

...created fissures in taken-for-granted lifestyles which transcended the loss of the material (i.e. livestock) to become also the loss of the self (respondents perceptions of identity and meaning associated with this lifestyle were called into question) (Convery et al, 2005, p. 104).

The proximity to death in the FMD study compounded the grief felt by the owners of the livestock. For the participants in the FMD research, there was often no geographic buffer such as an abattoir and the public pyres that burned throughout Cumbria were often situated on the farms. It is argued that some of the decisions taken by government departments in London increased the emotional pain; what were previously familiar and reassuring surroundings became associated with death and decay. The FMD researchers called for a “deeper understanding of the nature of humans’ attachment to their animals and the meaning of this relationship in different sociocultural and occupational groups” (Convery et al, 2008, p. 60). Pertinent to this Black Saturday study is their emphasis on listening to local people:

...without situated knowledge which is local and *partial*, in the sense that it has a perspective based on experience, authorities cannot ‘see’ how to act, and this is one of

⁸ A recent edition of the *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, 2015, vol. 30, no. 2, contains six papers on the subject of animals and disaster.

the hardest lessons in the wake of disasters where the actions of recovery agencies have the potential to bring relief, but also to retraumatize and make things so much worse (Convery et al, 2008, p. 87, original emphasis).

Marginalising the voices of local people, who have been directly or indirectly affected by a crisis, is counter-productive for 'recovery'. The scale of the FMD crisis highlighted for the researchers, "how difficult it is to articulate these relations, and how these complexities, while 'known' implicitly, have rarely been examined by the people for whom they are fundamental" (Convery et al, 2008, p. 51).

The chilling absence of 'stuff'

It is widely accepted in the literature that possessions can be tightly tied to identity and can also play an important part in connecting a person to a place. The sensation of disorientation is intensely portrayed in the first of 30 portraits in Miller's (2008) book titled, *The comfort of things*. The 30 portraits stem from interviewees that he encountered (with Parrott, his co-researcher), over a timeframe of 17 months, mainly from a single street in South London (Miller, 2008). Miller describes the book as being:

...about how people express themselves through their possessions, and what these tell us about their lives. It explores the role of objects in our relationships, both to each other and to ourselves (2008, p. 1).

In his first portrait, titled 'Empty', Miller writes that he can "barely ever remember encountering...a habitation entirely devoid of any form of decoration" (Miller, 2008, p. 8). Beyond the most basic "carpet and furniture" George's flat is a "void", and Miller notes that there "is a violence to such emptiness" (Miller, 2008, p. 9). He refers to the "chilling absence" of the emptiness that "leaches away one's own sense of being" (Miller, 2008, p. 8). The disorientation of spending time in a home lacking material objects that link George, the resident, to his memories of past places and relationships is a shock to Miller. Again, the experience of Miller based on his encounter with someone who has decided to live in a sterile environment, resonates with the emotions felt by disaster survivors who are forced to obtain temporary, anonymous accommodation. Philosopher Bourdieu refers to the dispossessed in the context of destitution, as condemned to "feeling out on a limb, displaced, out of place and ill at ease" (Bourdieu, 1999, cited in Robinson, 2011, p. 106). Unsurprisingly, Miller is confounded by George's willingness to spend all his days in a clinical space. The words that Miller uses to describe his embodied reaction (almost an agitation) to George's home reveal the powerful negative emotions that can be triggered by spending time, or being forced to live in, a sterile

domestic space. The fact that George does not seem fazed by the blandness of his home is a reminder that the presence of possessions is not universally preferred.

Hoffman, an anthropologist, had her personal possessions – “clothing, furniture, photographs, heirlooms, art work, beloved objects, one car and two pets” and 25 years of research, seven manuscripts “not yet to publishers, all my other writings, ideas, projects in development, the slides and photos of travels, lectures and course notes, and my entire library” – destroyed in the 1991 Oakland firestorm in California (Hoffman, 1998, p. 55). This catastrophic event killed 25 people, destroyed over 2800 homes and rendered over 6000 people homeless. Hoffman writes: “The pattern of my days, my plans, my routines were irrevocably ruptured. The warp of my past was torn from the weave of my future. Who I am, what I was, what I intended to do, the fabric of my life, utterly unravelled” (Hoffman, 1998, p. 56). She adds:

Though thankfully I lost no family, no friends, no people, still to describe the devastation both physical and psychological of this kind of loss is like trying to define eternity or infinity. It defies words, evades phrases, and renders mute any and every euphemistic catchall (Hoffman, 1998, p. 55).

Some elements of Hoffman’s work relate closely to this Gippsland research which explores the social and emotional complications triggered by bushfire. These elements include the shift in relationships (“Many unions, long and short, broke apart”) and friendships: “Friends did not, or could not, offer aid or comfort. Friends grew impatient, proved unsympathetic, disappeared” (Hoffman, 1998, p. 58). Hoffman’s book chapter is focused on the gender divisions in the aftermath; the community appeared to snap back into a time when traditional gender roles were the norm before reverting back to how it was prior to the crisis. When recovery took longer than “the day, week or month they [the unaffected ‘outsiders’] envisioned” sympathy ran dry and in its place, were “waves of jealousy” and envy “we were informed that we had all new things, we would eventually have new houses, and we were ‘lucky’” (Hoffman, 1998, p. 60). Erickson eloquently describes this impatience of ‘outsiders’ that Hoffman refers to:

Disasters linger in the mind. They appear in the thoughts of the day and in the dreams of night. They are experienced as an ongoing event, a continuing calamity, long after others have turned the page to a new day, and it will remain so until the minds of those who lived through it reach a certain peace. That can be a very difficult thing to explain to people who still calculate time in a way you no longer can (Erickson, 2014, pp. xvi-xvii)

Erickson’s words underline the need to account for time, and how it *feels* within the post-disaster space. Hoffman (1998) details the divisions, contradictions and tensions that surfaced in her

local community in the weeks, months and years after the catastrophic fire. Importantly she touches on the sensory repercussions: “Nothing I owned carried the aroma of my family for at least a year” (Hoffman, 1998, p. 61).

Sensory losses are prominent in Dugan’s (2007) account of surviving the floods that followed the landfall of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, Louisiana on 28 August 2005. One of the costliest (\$89 billion damage) and deadliest disasters in the history of the USA: the death toll exceeded 1800 with the exact number remaining unknown. The combination of natural disaster and human neglect triggered the mass involuntary displacement of approximately one million people from the Gulf Coast Region (Morris, 2008 cited in Morrice, 2010, p. viii). Dugan, who was born and had lived all her life in New Orleans, shares her experience six months after permanently relocating to San Antonio, Texas. She reflects on the rupturing of her everyday life:

I miss the smell of the morning I knew so well in New Orleans. I miss the sounds that woke me each morning. I miss the food I grew up on. I miss the familiar faces, the architecture that speaks like no other; I miss the history of my city. I even miss what I hated.

I feel I am slowly forgetting the city I love and was home to me. I am beginning to remember the city I come home to over Christmas where homes are in ruins, neighbors are eerily quiet, and there is no life. There are no birds. (Dugan, 2007, p. 45)

Dugan feels that the scale of the trauma has complicated how she processes her loss. A whole community can be regarded as a single entity experiencing collective grief for the loss of its shared identity (Eisenbruch, 1990 cited in Dugan, 2007, p. 41). From Dugan’s perspective it is “more difficult to find yourself anew when your family and friends are also experiencing loss of identity, self, and home” (Dugan, 2007, p. 41). Dugan frames her loss and permanent relocation as an opportunity for growth and personal transformation. She advocates for mental health professionals to “acknowledge the grief, confusion, feelings of dissociation, and depersonalization” for survivors hardly have “the words to articulate feelings never before experienced” (Dugan, 2007, p. 45).

The work of Whittle, Medd, Deeming, Kashefi, Mort, Twigger Ross, Walker and Watson (2010) sets the bar high for social research in the wake of a disaster. The number of people involved in this research team reveals what can be achieved with sufficient resources and most importantly time. Their case study, of Kingston-upon-Hull, a town located in the North-East of England devastated by flood in June 2007, aimed to offer an in-depth account of the experience of flood recovery. In order to find out what the long-term disaster recovery process was like for flood

affected residents, the researchers used an action research model involving interviews, weekly diaries and group discussions, with 44 participants over an 18 month time frame generating an enormous amount of primary material. The researchers stated that the flood, for many of their participants, was not the lowest point; it was what came afterwards in the form of “secondary impacts that are more significant – and more stressful – than the floods themselves” (Whittle et al, 2010, p. 55). Whittle et al. (2010, p. 60) found that recovery statistics, such as how many people are back in their homes and the extent to which public services are up and running, “can disguise the complexity of who is affected and the processes by which such effects come into being”. The researchers argue that there is an “important emotional component to disaster recovery that goes unnoticed” (Whittle et al. 2010, p. 60). Their flood research focuses on the hidden vulnerabilities, the less obvious or lower profile losses and changes that might potentially trigger emotional and psychological pain in survivors. They found, through the weekly diaries, interviews and discussions that:

...the impact of flood is much more of a process rather than just an event – a process that is punctuated by twists and turns and ups and downs emerging and amplifying through the interactions between managing the flood recovery process, maintaining routines and dealing with everyday life events (Whittle et al. 2010, p. 63).

One of their key recommendations is for researchers to “pay attention to the longer-term process to more fully understand disaster recovery” (Whittle et al. 2012, p. 68). How they scrutinise the meaning of vulnerability and resilience is useful for this bushfire research. The glaring gaps that exist between narratives – the micro (flood survivors in survival mode) and the macro (a focus on the statistics about how many have returned) – are revealing.

Everyday sensory practices and intangible loss

People exist for us in and through their material presence (Miller, 2008). Research on home and place – belonging – incorporates the actions and interactions in everyday life, our routines and habits that are often described as ‘taken for granted’ or unconscious (Buttimer, 1980, p. 172). Buttimer (1980, p. 191) draws on the concept ‘Lifeworld’, introduced in 1936 by Husserl, to name the “busy day to day events,” the “taken for granted context and pattern of daily living” (1980, p. 191). The mundaneness of our everyday lives means that there is generally no point questioning or reflecting on it (Buttimer, 1980, p. 172). Tuan explains that it is through the repeated actions or habits that we acquire a ‘feel’ for a place:

It is made up of experiences, mostly fleeting and undramatic, repeated day after day and over the span of years. It is a unique blend of sights, sounds, and smells, a unique

harmony of natural and artificial rhythms such as times of sunrise and sunset, of work and play. The feel of a place is registered in one's muscles and bones (Tuan, 2001, p. 184).

In his description of how a 'feel' of a place is acquired, Tuan incorporates all the senses.

Bourdieu (in an interview with Wacquant, 1989, p. 43) refers to this familiar or predictable state of our domestic and social reality as being equivalent to "a fish in water". He claims that the world of practice is a world already populated by procedures to be followed and paths to be taken (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53). If disruption occurs, the 'Lifeworld' suddenly becomes visible; the previously unseen water has evaporated. 'Lifeworld' is a concept that encapsulates the depth and breadth of intangible loss that bushfire/disaster-affected people in all locations are forced to cope with.

Seamon (1980, p. 152) investigates how people experience "their everyday world" and coined the phrase, or notion of 'time-space routines and place-ballet' to describe the "behavior that has become more or less involuntary". Those 'time-space routines' maintain a continuity in people's lives, allowing them to "do automatically in the present moment what they have learned in the past" (Seamon, 1980, p. 159). His 'place-ballet' signifies a seamless flow of action that results in the smooth running of everyday life. Pink, who has published extensively on theories of place, identity and everyday practices that constitute domestic life, states that practices are inextricable from place (2006, p. 54). Carrying out habitual practices, regular daily routines, contributes to self identity and a sense of continuity, predictability and *control*. Miller (2008, p. 286) affirms that whatever a person does, be it cooking or moving from one room to another:

...the order of things in time and space reinforces their basic beliefs about the natural order of the world. In this way every day ritual is also an aesthetic, something which gives order, balance and harmony to the world people live in.

Ontological security encapsulates this state of feeling secure. Giddens (1990, cited in Dupuis & Thorns, 1998, p. 27) describes ontological security as the confidence that most human beings have in the "continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of their social and material environments". Dupuis and Thorns (1998, p. 30) assert that natural or built environments can only be a source of security, "or a site through which ontological security can be attained, through the meanings attached to them".

In Pink's cultural comparative inquiry, which was designed to develop insights into "how different men and women depart from traditional gender roles in different cultures", a video recorder was used to "collaboratively explore and reflect on the materiality of the kitchen and

‘normal’ routine everyday practices” with 40 participants from England and Spain (2012, p. 55). Reverberating through Pink’s domestic inquiry is the distinct and routine ways that people live in and respond, *through all their senses* to their home, arguably the most intimate space. Duffy and Waitt (2013, p. 467) argue that “sound is bound up with experiential, bodily and spatial practices and preformativities of hearing and listening that are crucial to making sense of self and the world”. Sounds, or lack of sounds can determine where the body feels ‘at home’, or not (Duffy & Waitt, 2017). Seamon (1980, p. 195, emphasis added) asserts that people are inescapably bound to place partly because they are *bodily beings*. He notes that interference with time-space routines can “generate a certain amount of stress” (Seamon, 1980, p. 159). This writing about bodily movement through familiar spaces, often incorporating multisensory interactions with useful or meaningful possessions, shows how enmeshed materiality and temporality are, in modern everyday lives.

From the Australian research perspective there is a lack of curiosity and investigation into how personal and domestic routines, in a post-disaster environment, are re-established by homeless and non-displaced people. Seamon’s concept of ‘time-space routines and place-ballet’ is valuable to this bushfire study because these unique and familiar movements are what join people “with space, place and time” (Seamon, 1980, p. 160). Pink is supportive of Seamon’s concept; she observes that practices like persons and things are never static (2012, p. 41). Sudden disruption to or total destruction of home, immediately eliminates the ‘time-space routines and place- ballet’, leaving people who are homeless and/or traumatised with no reference point or framework to seek comfort. Their ontological security has been fractured or disrupted. By engaging with the observation that everyday life is “the essence of who we are and our location in the world” (Pink 2012, p. 143), we can begin to grasp the grief triggered by loss that is ethereal or intangible. Seamon (1980) and Pink (2012) document the sensory and emotional feelings associated with the familiarity of home and their work can be extended to enrich our collective understanding of loss and grief in the post-bushfire landscape.

Solastalgia and non-spaces

In 2003 Albrecht, an Australian environmental philosopher coined a new term – *solastalgia* – to describe the lived experience of negative environmental change. Pervasive change can arrive in the form of disaster (drought, fire, flood, earthquake, cyclone and tsunami) or simply by the damaging presence of humans or their economically motivated endeavours (such as war, terrorism, mining, disease epidemics and climate change). Albrecht (2005, p. 48) noted that there

are places on Earth that are not completely lost, but are radically transformed and that *solastalgia* is “a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at ‘home’”. Kearns and Smith (1994), whose research focuses on the relationship between housing and health, support this view. They refer to “indeterminate spaces” and assert that “having a dwelling and being homeless are not mutually exclusive categories” (Kearns & Smith, 1994, p. 420). Albrecht (2006) states that *solastalgia* can manifest in mental and physical suffering and his research suggests that extensive damage to a place tends to cause more distress to people with deep roots in a particular environment. Two important points Albrecht raises are the speed at which the change occurs (slow onset or rapid change are quite different experiences); and that the condition constitutes an “undermining of personal and community sense of identity, belonging and control” (Albrecht, 2006, p. 35).

Read, an Australian historian reflects on the circumstances of many lost landscapes, towns, suburbs and homes across Australia. His book documents the (invisible) emotion and grief triggered by forced or voluntary relocation and the loss of place (building new freeways, mining and moving off farm are some examples). Read writes:

The loss of a loved place sharpens perceptions of what is most valuable in the shaped and fashioned space. The affection for a home, in western cultures, is the point where griefs for lost countries, towns, properties, gardens and suburbs seems to meet. Home is the ultimate focus of all lost places (2009, p. 102).

Read incorporates views from both people who return to place and people who chose not to return and opted to re-establish their lives in an alternative location. His book also contains the conflict about the depth of attachment to particular locations and landscapes:

Australian farmers are beginning to advance their own sets of valued memories, attachments and histories over the same areas claimed by Aboriginal people. Having worked for many years among Aborigines deprived of their country, and more recently with non-Aborigines deprived of theirs, I am filled with anxiety at the complexity of such disputed attachments. (Read, 2009, p. xi).

Read (2009, p. 198) eloquently conveys the complicated emotional feelings (“both collective and lonely”) for lost places and advocates the advancement of place-bereavement (which he equates with grief for dead people) “as a continuing theme of contemporary distress” (Read, 2009, p. 198).

Albrecht (2006) and Read (2009) are united in their belief that the physical and emotional toll of extreme forms of change to place and the absence of solace needs to be recognised and warrants a higher public profile. Read does not consider loss from the perspective of climate change which is, for Albrecht (2006), a primary focus.

Notable in the work of Kearns and Smith (1994), which pre-dates the writing on *solastalgia*, is their call for research that incorporates the “well-being of the relatively well-housed who do not experience a sense of being at home”. Without downplaying the seriousness and complexity of homeless persons, this bushfire study addresses the metaphorical homelessness to which Kearns and Smith (1994) refer. Concepts derived from the fields of migration and refugee studies can also be useful for exploring the emotional landscape of homelessness as a result of bushfire:

‘Home’ for some, might become a neither/nor situation, and in such a case people might cease to find themselves at home in either the location of displacement or the place of origin from which they were forced to flee (Motasim & Heynen, 2011, p. 64).

This ‘neither/nor’ concept encapsulates a sort of ‘doubleness’ as people build new homes whilst yearning for the home they once had (Motasim & Heynen, 2011). By delving into the narratives of fire-affected people who have either nominated to rebuild on their burnt-out land or purchase a house elsewhere, this research examines the positive and negative multisensory responses to displacement.

The work conducted by Beilin and Reid (2014) has strong connections with the doctoral research of Cox (1996), cited earlier in this chapter. Their exploration of the meaning of home for people living in two contrasting bushfire-prone landscapes (the Adelaide Hills in South Australia and the Southern Grampians in western Victoria) is a useful piece of Australian post-Black Saturday research. The authors state that the role of their research is to understand “how people shape, and are in turn shaped by their landscapes in ways that affect their lives and management decisions within these places; and their interaction with fire in these landscapes” (Beilin & Reid, 2014, p. 7). A team of four researchers, Beilin, Reid and two others, used a combination of visual and ethnographic research methods, which involved 40 participants engaged with a mapping task (they were asked to ‘mud map’ their social and ecological world) concurrently with an in-depth interview. They identified a weakness in the fire management agencies approach to protecting ‘assets’ “which is usually assumed to mean houses and structures associated with houses” (Reid & Beilin, 2015, p. 101). They examined the narrow view of ‘loss’:

An asset-based approach that places the most significant value on built structures such as houses limits its relevance for people living in the landscapes most at risk. It also

sheds new light on public dissatisfaction with prescribed burning as a tool for mitigation as the parks and the reserves that are considered ‘risks’ by managers are being embraced as ‘home’ by many residents (Reid & Beilin, 2015, p. 102).

Reid and Beilin (2015) argue that the surrounding landscape, and the everyday practices that occur within them such as gardening and walking, plays a vital role in the creation of sense of home. Knowing the local flora and fauna, tuning into the seasonal changes in the landscape are “more than just place-making, but are home-making” (Reid & Beilin, 2015, p. 102). Their exploration of what constitutes everyday practices for residents in high-risk bushfire locations demonstrates the need for fire agencies to take a more sophisticated approach to community engagement and education. The ‘home’, which is usually referred to as a ‘house’ in the bushfire education material, is so much more than an ‘asset’: “this data suggests that the ‘asset’ to be managed in relation to bushfire is much more than the house and property” (Reid & Beilin, 2015, p. 101). A shared thread, between this Black Saturday study and their research, is the acknowledgement of the disparity between the macro (fire agency) and the micro (resident living in a bushfire prone location). The behaviour being prescribed by the organisation is clinical in nature and does not recognise the emotional connections people have with their home and place, and how emotions influence decisions and behaviour when home is threatened. Beilin and Reid’s (2014) research confirms the value of investigating the sensory repercussions for people who have been made homeless and returned, and for people who remain living in their intact/damaged home surrounded by a charred and alien landscape.

Contested words: trauma, recovery and resilience

How the government and the wider community respond to, and speak about, a traumatic event can shape the ways that affected individuals feel, in the present and the future, about the ‘recovery’ process. Tumarkin, who was displaced from the Soviet Union as a teenager, believes that the continuous misuse of the word ‘trauma’ obscures

...the fact that ‘traumatic’ is in no way a synonym for ‘unpleasant,’ ‘emotionally taxing’ or even ‘intensely painful.’ One word that perhaps most closely comes to expressing its meaning is ‘overwhelming.’ A traumatised person cannot fully take in or comprehend what has happened to them or what they have happened to witness. They are *overwhelmed* by a traumatic event. So much so that the ways in which they usually experience the world and make sense of their own place in it are effectively shattered (2005, p. 11, emphasis in original).

Authors, such as Didion (2015) and Macdonald (2014), write in order to try retrospectively to make sense of their experience of being *overwhelmed* in the days, weeks and months after a

sudden, traumatic event. The work of people like Didion (2015) and Macdonald (2014) humanise the deeply personal and bodily sensations of loss and grief. Relevant to this bushfire study is how words that are embedded in the language of disaster – originating at the macro level, the most geographically removed from the *traumascape* – have been diluted and rendered meaningless. Unsuitable words can understate or conceal the embodied grief of estrangement from home and the self.

It is important to consider the words that are used in the post-disaster space, as they can shape the way people who are *overwhelmed*, feel about their coping capacity. The word ‘recovery’ implies that there is an end point to the process of moving on with life after a disaster or crisis. Several disaster researchers have questioned and been critical of the language that is used and, in particular, the potential for words such as ‘recovery’ to cause (additional) harm to survivors. In their leading text on vulnerability, *At risk: natural hazards, people’s vulnerability and disasters*, Wisner, Blaikie, Cannon and Davis (2004, p. 309) ask “what is ‘recovery’ and ‘how long does it take?’” The authors note that “humans crave order and meaning and seek to stabilise their expectations in situations of uncertainty” and this explains the appeal of the concept of recovery (Wisner et al. 2004, p. 311). They argue that “in order to have ‘recovered,’ a household should have not only re-established its livelihood, physical assets and patterns of access, but should be *more* resilient to the next extreme event” (Wisner et al. 2004, p. 313, emphasis in original).

Furthermore, they write:

The terminology associated with disaster recovery is biased towards optimism. The key words – ‘recovery,’ ‘re-establish,’ ‘reconstruction,’ ‘restoration,’ and ‘rehabilitation’ – are prefixed with ‘re’, indicating a return to the pre-existing situation. A more realistic view challenges the assumption that such recovery will actually be achieved. Instead, the more pessimistic argument suggests there will be uncertainty, unforeseen events and even the reproduction of vulnerability. A rather depressing implication...is that in some cases the most vulnerable households and individuals do not recover (Wisner et al. 2004, p. 312).

Whittle et al. (2010), in their previously mentioned longitudinal UK flood study, reinforce the findings of Wisner et al. (2004), when they pose the following questions: *Is there an end point to recovery and, if so, what does it look like? How will we know when people are there?* (Whittle et al. 2014, p. 201). The flood researchers found that recovery was “experienced as an unpredictable series of ‘ups’ and ‘downs,’ more akin to a game of Snakes and Ladders than a steady process of improvement” (Whittle et al. 2014, p. 200). They clarify that they do not want to:

...imply that recovering a sense of normality is a misguided or impossible goal.....what we wish to show is that this ‘normality’ is not easily captured: rather, it takes much work to recreate it piece by piece because – and this is the key point – *it can never be the same ‘reality’ as that which existed before the flood* (Whittle et al. 2014, p. 201, emphasis added).

Beilin and Wilkinson (2015, p. 1213), in their introduction to the special edition of the *Urban Studies* journal, titled ‘Governing for urban resilience’, refer to the “language and optimism of resilience”, which has been “appropriated by every discipline and op-ed piece, raising the spectre of meaninglessness...” They state that it is their view that “...resilience should not be, and cannot be all things to everyone because it cannot be made into a homogenous ‘thing’” (Beilin & Wilkinson, 2015, p. 1213). How the Gippsland participants encountered the mainstream language of ‘recovery’, resilience and the added imposition of conventional time (filtered down from the macro to the micro) is a key aspect of this study and will add to our understanding of the complexity of post-disaster life.

Conclusion

A common thread running through the secondary literature is human/non-human relationships comprised of: people/Earth, people/fire, people/home and people/possessions. Drawn from diverse disciplines the literature is underpinned by the temporal. Research conducted by Indigenous and non-Indigenous historians and anthropologists confirm the “profound interdependence” between fire and the living world (Pyne, 2012, p. 14). Over millennia the First Peoples used fire as a ‘tool’ for land management. The brief time that has elapsed, a “blink in geological time” (Clark, 2012, p. 194) since Europeans arrived in Australia has not been sufficient for the development of a modern-day understanding or appreciation of the crucial relationship between fire and the First Peoples. The severing of the people/fire relationship through colonisation produced an environmental legacy that contributes substantially to the contemporary ‘fire problem’ in the highly flammable and heavily populated southern regions of Australia. The writing of Judge Stretton in the aftermath of the catastrophic 1939 bushfires in Victoria resonates just as powerfully in the present day (Victoria, Parliament 1939).

The literature reviewed in this chapter suggests that home, in the modern-day capitalist sense, is a powerful site of identity. Home and possessions intersect and contribute substantially to an individual’s ontological security. By reviewing literature across disciplines, leaning heavily on Blunt & Dowling (2006), Easthope (2004) and Saunders & Williams (1988), the concept of home has been explored in all its complexity. The physical structure and familiar interior of

home is made more intimate and meaningful by what it contains: objects ranging along the spectrum of generic and useful to unique and deeply personal. Because possessions are so tightly entwined with ‘sense of self’, specifically how it evolves and is sustained over the life cycle, this chapter prioritised literature that addresses the meanings behind the ways that people relate to and interact with material culture.

The research conducted by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, (1981) and more recently, Miller (2001, 2008 & 2010) and Pink (2006 & 2012) was shown to be highly instructive for this post-bushfire study. Although completed in times of stability, their writing about people and their ‘stuff’ delivers a palpable sense of *felt* disorientation and grief that can occur in circumstances of abrupt deprivation. The multisensory interactions and routines that unfold across time and within those intimate domestic spaces is a vital component of this chapter, and the study as a whole.

This review has identified valuable international disaster research that utilises concepts such as *well-being* and *lifescapes* to engage with the non-linear sensation of time after a traumatic event. This chapter has confirmed that grief, specifically stemming from the destruction of personal possessions and animals, is an under-explored area of Australian disaster scholarship. This neglect within the field of bushfire research is curious considering the predicted increases in the frequency and severity of bushfire. Neglecting to investigate the emotional terrain of the *afterwards* potentially constitutes, for fire-affected people, what Doka (1999) names disenfranchised grief. Countries with similar cultural attitudes or relationships to home ownership appear to engage more readily with grief and suffering that has been triggered by dispossession, displacement and estrangement, as an outcome of a disastrous or catastrophic geo-event.

The chapter that follows will explain my research methodology and a selection of ‘thinking tools’ created by the French philosopher Bourdieu that have assisted me with making sense of the participants’ sense-making.

Chapter Three

Narrative inquiry & Pierre Bourdieu

Introduction

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first section focuses on my paradigmatic stance (set of beliefs) and details my epistemology (how we/I know what we know). This includes an explanation of the concepts of constructivism and social constructionism; a description of the distinct elements of qualitative research; and insights into narrative inquiry, the methodology that drives this exploratory work.

The second part of this chapter is dedicated to the *thinking tools*⁹ of the French social philosopher Pierre Bourdieu. I identify which particular *thinking tools* resonate with, and are useful for, explaining the knowledge generated by this post-disaster study. It is important to note that the temporal element, sometimes easily overlooked, predominantly at the macro level, is a constant and significant presence in this inquiry into the complicated repercussions of disruption and comprehensive loss. It is futile to try to isolate time (tempo) as it permeates the entire thesis.

Part One

Overarching paradigmatic stance

I am aware that my personal/researcher *net* contains my epistemological, ontological and methodological premises, my paradigm or interpretive framework, which is, “a basic set of beliefs that guides action” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 26). These beliefs inform every stage of the research process (Crotty, 1998). Reybold (2002, p. 537) emphasises that epistemology is more than a framework for knowing and understanding reality because, “an individual’s way of knowing predisposes a way of being”. Epistemology is the discourse about the nature and status of knowledge (Jenkins, 1992, p. 46). Ontology, the study of being or existence, questions the way things are in the world, whereas epistemology, the study of the nature of knowledge, questions how human beings attain knowledge about the world (Ashe et al. 1999). Delineating a paradigm of inquiry involves three separate but interrelated tasks:

⁹ Italics will be used for conceptual tools.

- Taking a philosophical stance on the nature of reality and how that reality can be known
- Identifying an appropriate theoretical perspective through which to view that reality
- Selecting a suitable methodological approach for investigating that reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

During this research project I have acquired insights into my philosophical stance (which pre-existed this current work but was not necessarily named). Essentially, my philosophical stance and methodological approach was arrived at organically (through my own history, curiosity and passion). Beilharz (1991, p. 9) writes that all sorts of circumstances, “who teaches us, how and where, what we read, when and with what resonances in our memories, senses of experience and identity”, contribute to the creation of an individual’s social knowledge. My methodological approach is comprised of narrative inquiry. I arrived at my theoretical perspective by way of secondary literature in the field of material culture. My reading of texts, in particular the work of Daniel Miller (2010) and Sarah Pink (2006, 2009, 2012), steered me towards Bourdieu’s *thinking tools*, which enhanced my understanding of the core concepts generated by this exploratory study.

Social constructivism and social constructionism

My framework sits within the social constructivism interpretive paradigm. As a researcher I accept that the interpretation of reality is subjective and depends on people’s experiences. The world that sociologists study and seek to understand cannot be reduced to one *correct* set of meanings or explanatory system (Giddens & Pierson, 1998, p. 2). Human behaviour can be explained but is not predictable. Underlying theories that fall within this paradigm include, but are not limited to, phenomenology, hermeneutics (the practice of interpretation) and symbolic interactionism. We all have our own interpretation of reality, and the social constructionist perspectives, “emphasize that how stressors impact individuals will largely depend upon how those individuals interpret them” (Cameron & McDermott, 2007, p. 11). Just as the participants have their own view of the world, that has been shaped by their history and personal identity (incorporating their gender, class, position in the life cycle, and cultural background) so too has this researcher. Wertz (2011, p. 280) writes: “Each researcher’s distinctive talents as a knower and unique presence as a person appear to be inevitable in and beneficial to human science”. My role as researcher is to interpret the participant’s interpretations at one moment in time, of a complex and life-changing event, without prior knowledge of their stability or instability before

Black Saturday. British sociologist Anthony Giddens coined the term ‘double hermeneutic’ to describe this process of interpreting and reinterpreting social realities (Crotty, 1998, p. 56). In order to form meaning, social scientists must contend with the double hermeneutic (Crotty, 1998, p. 56). The meaning making process cannot be “quarantined from where one stands or is placed in the web of social reality” (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 342). My methodological stance involves empathetic understanding to discover how people construct their lives and why they act as they do “knowing that...we cannot wholly separate our understandings of data from ourselves...we can try to understand what things mean to the people we study” (Charmaz, 2011, p. 292). I then extract meaning from the Gippsland narratives and explain their value within the context of the wider outside world using a theoretical lens.

Crotty (1998, p. 58) explains the distinction between the concepts of constructivism and social constructionism (which are sometimes confused or are used interchangeably):

Constructivism points out the unique experience of each of us. It suggests that each one’s way of making sense of the world is as valid and worthy of respect as any other, thereby tending to scotch any hint of a critical spirit. On the other hand, social constructionism emphasises the hold our culture has on us: it shapes the way in which we see things (even the way we feel things!) and gives us a quite definite view of the world.

Constructionism implies, “that meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (Crotty, 1998, p. 43). Gergen (1985, p. 266) asserts that social constructionist inquiry is:

Principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live. It attempts to articulate common forms of understanding as they now exist, as they have existed...and as they might exist...

Schwandt (2003, p. 305) writes: “We do not construct our interpretations in isolation but against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language, and so forth”. A constructivist epistemology can serve as a bridge, uniting theory and practice (Hoshmand & Polkinghorne, 1992, cited in Romanoff, 2001, p. 254).

Qualitative research

The two major approaches to gathering and analysing data, in the disciplines of psychology and social science, are qualitative and quantitative. The qualitative inquiry movement is, ‘built on a profound concern with understanding what other human beings are doing or saying’ (Schwandt, 2003, p. 311). Qualitative researchers, “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 3). Often they are represented as polar opposites with quantitative research

methods, focused on statistics and large sample sizes (writing in the passive voice) and qualitative methods, prioritising rich descriptions (writing in the personal/informal voice). Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004, p. 14) examine the divisive nature of the “quantitative versus qualitative debate” that has been sustained for “more than a century”. They note that there are commonalities, sometimes overlooked, between the two approaches:

Regardless of paradigmatic orientation, all research in the social sciences represents an attempt to provide warranted assertions about human beings (or specific groups of human beings) and the environments in which they live and evolve (Biesta & Burbules, cited in Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 15).

Patton (1990, p. 477) offers details about the quantitative versus qualitative debate, “which is rooted in the philosophical differences about the nature of reality”. He advises that qualitative researchers be prepared to explain and defend the appropriateness and value of their approaches (Patton, 1990). Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 17) mention that the term ‘qualitative research’ is confusing “because it can mean different things to different people”. Qualitative research is utilised and interpreted across many disciplines. For the purpose of clarity, Denzin and Lincoln (2003, p. 4) offer the following generic description:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

In this study, which is purely qualitative, I am investigating how people affected by bushfire in Gippsland make meaning from their experience of living in, or being displaced from, a post-disaster landscape. More specifically, I am exploring how the people I interviewed had adapted, or (at the time of the interview) were struggling to adapt, after this sudden and traumatic event had complicated and/or ruptured their lives. Whether they had been rendered homeless or not after the bushfire, the weaves of their daily life-patterns were in tatters (Attig, 2005, p. 36).

Using a qualitative methodology allows me to develop a highly contextualised understanding of complex and dynamic phenomena as they are experienced by traumatised people in everyday life (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). In qualitative research, the “exceptional voices can be heard and not smoothed away as they might be in more conventional approaches aiming for a neat, universal ‘truth’” (Bell, 2011, p. 537). Bell values qualitative enquiry that is based on lived experiences as it offers a “richness and creative potential” in interpreting “real and valuable accounts of a phenomenon” (Bell, 2011, p. 537). Whilst the participants share their reality

(which forms the backbone of this study), the researcher's reality and the reader's interpretation of the work constitute multiple realities. With qualitative research there is flexibility and room to be thoroughly immersed in the words of participants, which can enhance a study, provided there is adequate transparency and reflexivity.

Methodology

To gain insights into, and advance knowledge about, what it is like to live in or be displaced from a post-bushfire landscape, I am conducting qualitative research comprised of narrative inquiry.

Narrative inquiry

Narrative is the "primary form by which human experience is made meaningful" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 1). The study of narrative "is the study of the ways humans experience the world" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). It is common for narratives to be acquired by interviewing people around the topic of interest but narrative research "may also involve the analysis of written documents" (Josselson, 2011, p. 225). Polkinghorne (1988, p. 20) writes that narrative is "always controlled by the concept of time and by the recognition that temporality is the primary dimension of human existence". Narrative inquiry resonates powerfully with my interpretive, social constructionist paradigm: fitting comfortably within my personal/researcher *net*. As my principal methodology, narrative inquiry assists me to question and explore the relationship between continuity and change. It allows me to "grapple with the subtleties and variations" (Sugiman et al, 2008, p. 7).

Narrative inquiry helps me to understand the importance of time, place and social context for people whose lives have been ruptured and/or complicated by bushfire. Bury (1982 cited in Charmaz, 2011, p. 170) refers to such occurrences as "biographical disruptions". The experience of "returning to nothing" (Read, 2009) and the sensation weeks months and years later, of yearning for possessions, routines and the sensorial familiar (interior and exterior) landscapes can be meaningfully explored by focusing, as narrative inquiry does, on "how events are understood and organized" not by seeking a "factual record of what 'really' happened" (Josselson, 2011, p. 225). The aim of narrative research is not to generalise but instead, to explore the "nuances and interrelationships among aspects of experience that the reader might apply to better understand other related situations" (Josselson, 2011, p. 239). Crucially, narrative inquirers pay attention to factors beyond the spoken word, not just the content of what was said

by the participant, but the structure and context of the telling. Narrative refers to both “the product (the story that is told) and the process (the act of telling)” (Romanoff, 2001, p. 250). Josselson (2011, p. 239) writes that narrative research “is conducted in conversation with the theoretical and conceptual literature, either to critique existing concepts or to extend and deepen them”.

Narrative inquiry may be ‘traced to Aristotle’s *Poetics* and Augustine’s *Confessions*’ (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 12). Roland Barthes (1915-1980) who “blurred the distinction between criticism and (poetic) writing” (Lechte, 1994, p. 126) acknowledged the centrality and ubiquity of narrative in the lives of people:

The narrative is present at all times, in all places, in all societies; the history of narrative begins with the history of mankind; there does not exist, and never has existed, a people without narratives (Barthes, 1966 cited in Polkinghorne, 1981, p. 14).

Narratives perform significant functions at multiple levels:

At the individual level, people have a narrative of their own lives which enables them to construe what they are and where they are headed. At the cultural level, narratives serve to give cohesion to shared beliefs and to transmit values (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 14)

Narrative inquiry has been adapted and applied in a diversity of disciplines and has a “long history in literature where literary theory is the principal intellectual resource” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 12). As stated earlier, the major component of narrative is time. Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 50) write that narrative studies have temporal dimensions and “address temporal matters; they focus on the personal and the social in a balance appropriate to the inquiry; and they occur in a specific place or sequences of places”.

Riessman (2015, p. 1056) cites the 1980s as being the “beginning of the narrative turn in the social sciences”. Throughout the 1980s and in particular the 1990s, there was resurgence in the profile and application of narrative inquiry (inclusive of debates about what constitutes a narrative and which methods are or are not suitable). During that timeframe, deep into his career, Jerome Bruner (1915-2016), an American psychologist, expressed surprise at “how little effort has gone into discovering how humans come to construct the social world and the things that transpire therein” (1991, p. 4). He believed that “we know altogether too little about how we go about constructing and representing the rich and messy domain of human interaction” (Bruner, 1991, p. 4). Bruner’s central concern was not how narrative as text is constructed but rather “how it operates as an instrument of mind in the construction of reality” (Bruner, 1991, p. 5). He recognised that stories are “fundamental building blocks of human experience and argued that stories represent some kind of brain processing of the events that the individual has experienced

and made meaning of” (Wertz et al, 2011, p. 65). Bruner argued, “a life as led is inseparable from a life as told – or more bluntly, a life is not ‘how it was’ but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold” (2004, p. 708). This line of reasoning reinforces the prominence of time and how, in my bushfire research, meanings and interpretations can (potentially) shift and change as the space between the traumatic event and the present grows. Essentially, the passing of time can subtly or significantly alter our interpretation of a stressful or traumatic event. Riessman (2001, p. 6) states that narratives do not mirror, “they refract the past” and that “the ‘truths’ of narrative accounts are not in their faithful representations of a past world, but in the shifting connections they forge among past, present, and future”.

Narrative does not “fit neatly within the boundaries of any single scholarly field” (Riessman, 1993, p. 1) and there are variations across the disciplines in “what a telling must consist of to be labelled as narrative” (Sandelowski, 1991, p. 162). Narratives, in general, are understood as stories that include a “temporal ordering of events and an effort to make something out of those events: to render, or to signify, the experiences of persons-in-flux in a personally and culturally coherent, plausible manner” (Sandelowski, 1991, p. 162). Universally, narrative descriptions are created for “ourselves and for others about our own past actions, and we develop storied accounts that give sense to the behaviour of others” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 14). Narrative is one of the operations of the realm of meaning and the realm of meaning, “is not a thing or a substance, but an activity” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 4). He goes on to suggest that the study of human beings by the human sciences “needs to focus on the realm of meaning in general, and on narrative meaning in particular” (p.11). As Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 121) note “all narrative research studies tell participants’ stories, but they are also autobiographical, growing out of the researcher’s interests and experiences”. An earlier chapter made mention of my personal relationship with time and how that shifted and evolved throughout my candidature. My personal experiences intersecting with and influencing this research, have complicated “my own storied self” and in turn, shaped my interpretation of the Gippsland narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). A conspicuous element of narrative inquiry is the absence of a ‘secure base’ and understanding that there are multiple ways of knowing (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 25). Narrative inquirers recognise the “tentative and variable nature of knowledge” and they “accept and value the way in which narrative inquiry allows wondering, tentativeness and alternative views to exist as part of the research account” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 25). Undertaking a narrative inquiry, or inquiring narratively into experience, is rife with challenges and possibilities (Caine, 2014, p. 1162).

Trauma narratives

My qualitative study explores the repercussions of a sudden traumatic event. Narrative plays a vital role in reinforcing and re-framing our personal identity. Riessman (1989, p. 743) argues that “stress research needs to attend more closely to the personal meanings of life events, and show how narrative methods can enrich studies of stress by illuminating how individuals make sense of difficult experiences”. Douglas and Barnett (2014, p. 1) write about the “myriad ways that people tell stories about their lives or the lives of others” and remark on the prominent position of life narratives in the contemporary Australian literary landscape. Trauma narratives offer personal insights about events or “issues of national significance”, which are often messy and complicated, these events are brought into the foreground (Douglas & Barnett, 2014, p. 51). Douglas and Barnett assert:

Trauma texts play a pivotal role in shaping contemporary Australian life writing—for instance, Stolen Generation testimony, war stories, narratives of childhood abuse and neglect, refugee and asylum-seeker narratives, family memoirs. The list of subjects is substantial (2014, p. 51).

As documented earlier in Chapter Two, bushfire is an intrinsic part of the Australian landscape and it is anticipated with the changing climate, that bushfires will become more frequent and more intense. The majority of the 25 Gippsland narratives that I gathered for the purpose of this study constitute trauma narratives. I have analysed and interpreted these trauma narratives with the aim of humanising the experience of individuals who were directly impacted by a catastrophic bushfire that forms part of our nation’s history (Douglas & Barnett, 2014, p. 51). Narratives can be “fruitful sources of information” and potentially (often inadvertently), “powerful agents of change”(Romanoff, 2001, p. 246).

In Chapter Two, the literature revealed that significance was attached to the slipperiness of ‘clock time’ post-bushfire (or after other traumatic events). Bruner (1991, p. 6) notes that it is “time whose significance is given by the meaning assigned to events within its compass”. Time passing in the post-disaster context, can often be perceived (or used) as a measure of ‘resilience,’ and this point will be explored in more detail in Chapter Eight.

Part Two

The ‘thinking tools’ of Pierre Bourdieu

Throughout his career Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) “was preoccupied with how societies work” (Schubert, 2008, p. 183) and is considered “one of the foremost social philosophers of the twentieth century” (Grenfell, ed. 2008, p. 1). Wacquant (2004, p. 98) describes Bourdieu and Michel Foucault (1926-1984) as “the world’s two most cited and utilized authors in the social sciences today: both are critical thinkers and thinkers of power”. Over the course of his professional life Bourdieu created words and revived antique words that contributed to his unique practice of social science and his theory of practice. Bourdieu wrote and published prolifically, often beginning with his personal experiences and observations. His major work was in Algeria where he conducted ethnographic research from 1958-1961 during its war of independence from France. He also worked in areas of anthropology, education, media and cultural production. Bourdieu published on a multitude of other topics; some of these included economics, politics, art, philosophy, law, religion, media, language, gender and history. The breadth of his writing meant that there were “few aspects of contemporary cultural theory...to which Bourdieu had not made a significant contribution” (Webb, Schirato & Danaher, 2002, p. 1). The applicability and adaptability of Bourdieu’s approach to the social sciences is illustrated by the wide range of academic disciplines that reference his writing and concepts (Grenfell, 2008, p. 2). Bourdieu’s legacy “amounts to a Bourdieusian language – a language which can be used to think with” (Grenfell, 2008, p. 2). Working with Bourdieu’s *thinking tools* can generate “insights and interpretations that are not available elsewhere” (Grenfell, 2008, p. 217). He “raises tricky questions and helps to provide some of the means by which they may be answered” and is “enormously good to think with” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 11).

This section of the chapter is dedicated to explaining the concepts that I have selected from Bourdieu’s oeuvre and how they help me to think theoretically about the Gippsland bushfire narratives.

Practice, habitus and field

Three of Bourdieu’s most important theoretical contributions are the concepts of *practice*, *habitus* and *field* (Jenkins, 1992, p. 67). Together they comprise the “basic methodological apparatus Bourdieu conceived for himself very early on in his career and applied with increasing sophistication through the rest of his life” (Buchanan, 2010, p. 67). Bourdieu uses these concepts

in an effort to bridge the gap between objectivism and subjectivism (structure and agency).

Practice is a term that refers to individual action occurring in a social environment. Everyday living and doing, mundane activities or tasks generally conducted in a repetitive and unconscious fashion and “is at the centre of human existence, the essence of who we are and our location in the world” (Pink, 2012, p. 143).

Bourdieu (1989, p. 8) emphasises the central role of time when he asserts, “To restore to practice its practical truth, we must therefore reintroduce time into the theoretical representation of a practice which, being temporally structured, is intrinsically defined by its tempo”. Our everyday lives unfold across time (divisions of the year, the day, the human life-cycle) and within (domestic) spaces (Bourdieu, 1990).

He also accentuates embodiment: “For Bourdieu, practices are a branch of reason or ‘savoir faire’ (‘know how’) that stems from the body rather than the mind” (Buchanan, 2010, p. 383).

Jenkins (1992, p. 69) reinforces that *practice* “as a visible, ‘objective’, social phenomenon cannot be understood outside of time/space”. Pink (2012, p. 19) recommends perceiving practices “as possibly resulting in forms of everyday innovation, self-conscious resistance or as maintaining a sense of stability”. *Practices* are embedded in what Bourdieu referred to as *habitus*. In order to understand *practices* we need to understand “both the evolving fields within which social agents are situated and the evolving *habitués* which those social agents bring to their fields of practice” (Maton, 2008, p. 53).

Habitus is “probably the most widely cited of Bourdieu’s concepts” and yet it is “also one of the most misunderstood, misused and hotly contested of Bourdieu’s ideas” (Maton, 2008, p. 49). A Latin word that refers to “a habitual or typical condition, state or appearance, particularly of the body”, (Jenkins, 1992, p. 74) *habitus* evolved from Bourdieu’s early studies in Algeria in the 1950s (Navarro, 2006, p. 16). Bourdieu decided to revive the old word, which “has been used innumerable times in the past” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 12), in order to differentiate his application of the concept from earlier accounts (Maton, 2008, p. 56). He specifically states, “I wanted to react against...structuralism” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 13). Bourdieu utilised the concept with the intention of transcending deep-seated dichotomies “structuring ways of thinking about the social world” and to “provide a means of analysing the workings of the social world through empirical investigations” (Maton, 2008, p. 49). Bourdieu (1989, p. 19) affirms that *habitus* is “both a system of schemes of production of practices and a system of perception and appreciation of practices”. The *habitus* is learned and is shaped by the interaction of individual action and objective structures. Through *habitus* “we have a world of common sense, a world that seems

self-evident” (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 19). He states that social action is “guided by a practical sense, by what we may call a ‘feel for the game’” (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 782). The “feel for the game”, “is the sense of the imminent future of the game, the sense of the direction of the history of the game that gives the game sense” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 82). Bourdieu observes “the relation to the body is a fundamental dimension of the *habitus* that is inseparable from a relation to language and to time” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 72). Every experience that we have is an embodied experience (Lloyd, 2002, p. 129). Finlayson (2002, p. 59) reinforces that we are all “embedded in a *habitus*, and this leads us in certain directions and away from others”. Essentially, *habitus* is an explanation for the regularity and predictability of social life (Pink, 2012, p. 18).

When he was asked to clarify the place of history in his thinking, Bourdieu responded to “this immensely complex question”, in general terms: “Suffice it to say that the separation of sociology and history is a disastrous division...all sociology should be historical and all history sociological” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 90). History, writes Jenkins (1992, p. 80) is the foundation of the *habitus*. Furthermore, *habitus* “is spontaneity without consciousness or will” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 56) and which choices we choose to make:

Depends on the range of options available at that moment (thanks to our current context), the range of options visible to us, and on our dispositions (*habitus*), the embodied experiences of our journey. Our choices will then in turn shape our future possibilities, for any choice involves foregoing alternatives and sets us on a particular path that further shapes our understanding of ourselves and of the world. The structures of the *habitus* are thus not ‘set’ but evolve – they are durable and transposable but not immutable (Maton, 2008, p. 52).

Internalised as second nature:

The *habitus*, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices – more history – in accordance with the schemes generated by history. It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the ‘correctness’ of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 54).

Bourdieu (in an interview with Wacquant, 1989, p. 43) observes that social reality:

Exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in *habitus*, outside and inside of agents. And when *habitus* encounters a social world of which it is the product, it finds itself ‘as fish in water’, it does not feel the weight of the water and takes the world about itself for granted.

Maton (2008, p. 51) refers to the “interlocking nature” of Bourdieu’s three main *thinking tools*. He believes that the key to understanding *practice* is to comprehend the relation between the relational structures of *habitus* and *field* (Maton, 2008, p. 57). Bourdieu first used the concept *field* in an article published in 1966. It became a significant aspect of his work. Much of his later writing was focused on specific investigations of *field*. The concept *field*, refers to social space in

which interactions, transactions and events occurred (Thomson, 2008). Bourdieu has stated he defines *field* as “a network, or a configuration” and that to “think in terms of *field* is to think relationally” (Bourdieu, in an interview with Wacquant, 1989, p. 39). Bourdieu (1988, p. 784) emphasises the “two-way relationship between *habitus* and *field*, where the field, as a structured space, tends to structure the *habitus*, while the *habitus* tends to structure the perception of the *field*”. Thomson (2008, p. 68) cites some examples of *fields* that Bourdieu investigated during his working life: education, culture, television, literature, science, housing, bureaucracy and “the restructured social sites of globalized de-industrialization”. Change occurs gradually during times of stability; along already anticipated pathways: this is when *habitus* and *field* are aligned (Hardy, 2008, p. 132). In times of crisis “*habitus* must respond to abrupt, sometimes catastrophic, *field* changes, but that response always takes time” (Hardy, 2008, p. 132). In these instances, where new and stable *field* structures are yet to emerge, new *field* opportunities surface. For the participants in this study change arrived in the form of a severe bushfire, and for many of those affected, the resulting disorientation can be described, using Bourdieusian language, as hysteresis (or the hysteresis effect).

Hysteresis

Hysteresis, a word of scientific origins that dates back to 1881, has two key characteristics, change and time lag (Hardy, 2008, p. 133). It is a term that describes a “particular sort of change that involves a mismatch and a time lag between the change in each of the previously ‘well-behaved’ elements that are ontologically distinct but interrelated” (Hardy, 2008, p. 144). In the context of Bourdieu’s work the two elements that are no longer “well-behaved” are *field* and *habitus*. The hysteresis effect is a concept that strongly resonates with this post-disaster research; it encapsulates the complexities associated with sudden disruption (incorporating comprehensive loss). Bourdieu (1989, p. 78) explains:

...as a result of the hysteresis effect necessarily implied in the logic of the constitution of *habitus*, practices are always liable to incur negative sanctions when the environment with which they are actually confronted is too distant from that to which they are objectively fitted.

Hysteresis, as a *thinking tool*, assists me to appreciate the “nature and consequences of field changes as experienced personally and at a social environmental level” (Hardy, 2008, p. 148). The principal focus of this research lies within Bourdieu’s *thinking tools*: when everyday practices (regular and predictable interactions with familiar/meaningful objects in a personalised domestic space) are suddenly fractured and an individual’s sense of self can be confused (or clarified). For many bushfire survivors, *habitus* and *field* are no longer in alignment; the abrupt

change has alerted them, retrospectively, to the vitality of the water, which is now painfully absent. What remains, for many, is a void.

The power of language

Language “is the most important sign system of human society” (Berger & Luckmann, 1991, p. 51). Words can have “differing effects depending on how we say them, where and when we say them and, indeed, who is actually doing the saying” (Finlayson, 2002, p.57). Another useful ‘thinking tool’ for this current study, sourced from his voluminous body of work, is Bourdieu’s understandings of language and in particular its role and impact on society. The social structures that Bourdieu (1988, p. 779) scrutinised are:

...the products of historical development and of historical struggles that must be analysed if one is to avoid naturalizing these structures. Even the words we employ to speak about social realities, the labels we use to classify objects, agents and events, like the names of occupations and of groups, all the categorical oppositions we make in everyday life and in scientific discourse are historical products.

Bourdieu insists that language cannot be analysed or understood in isolation from its cultural context and the social conditions of its production and reception (Jenkins, 1992, p. 152). For Bourdieu, language is both a ‘structuring structure’ (it provides the means for understanding the world) and a structured structure (it is the medium by which these understandings are communicated) (Webb et al, 2002, p. 95). Bourdieu’s analysis of language and social power is embedded in, and informs, his theory of social practice (Finlayson, 2002, p. 58). His writing on language assists me to think about the ways that words can hurt or cause (additional) suffering in the aftermath of a catastrophic event. This is directly linked to secondary stress, when disaster survivors can feel negative emotions in response to the official vocabulary of recovery. How definitions are formed and the application of clinical labels can be perceived or experienced as harmful. Some of the participants in this study resisted and/or criticised the language and labels that were applied to them, encapsulating their experience during the crisis and/or the type of loss they suffered. In society, language can be used as a battlefield and a weapon; it is “not powerful in and of itself, but it becomes powerful when it is used in particular ways, or by particular groups and institutions” (Webb et al, 2002, p. 95). Whether the powerful are conscious of their use of language and how words feel from the perspective of a bushfire survivor is worth considering. Bourdieu (1993) refers to the language used by politicians stating that political leaders employ “an authorized language, which exercises power, which can bring into existence what it states” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 39). In the aftermath of Black Saturday, the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, pledged to rebuild the fire-affected communities across Victoria “brick by

brick”. Bourdieu’s writing on the power of language helps me to explore the tensions within and between the various structures (micro, meso and macro) that can become more heightened in the aftermath of a catastrophic event. Traumatized people have fewer resources to draw on, mentally, emotionally and/or physically; the choice and application of words can have devastating consequences. I can examine how, or if, they react to the language of recovery and how, or if, it can potentially influence whether they will engage with the process of reconstruction at a personal and/or community level. The official language can contribute to how soon a bushfire survivor (and possibly their whole family) disengages and potentially forfeits tangible and intangible assistance. It seems counterintuitive and yet the language of recovery can, for some survivors, impede the capacity to “relearn the world” (Attig, 2005, p. 45).

Bourdieu’s reflexivity

Reflexivity is a philosophy of action applied to social scientists. Throughout Bourdieu’s career he insisted upon a reflexive approach to sociology: “Reflexive analysis must consider successively position in the social space, position in the field and position in the scholastic universe” (Bourdieu, 2004 cited in Delanty, 2005, p. 132). The researcher needs to be transparent about the two-way relationship between the objective structures of the intellectual, academic and social-scientific fields and the incorporated structures (*habitus*) of those operating within these fields (Deer, 2008, p. 206). Awareness of their *habitus* and how personal bias might creep into their work is vital. Reflexivity is not something that is deployed towards the end of a project; it is essential throughout all phases of the research.

Bourdieu examined many aspects of contemporary society and consistently critiqued his own thinking and approach to social research. Reflexive knowledge, for Bourdieu, involves the development of a reflexive relation to the *habitus*, to “demands and influences exerted by cultural fields, and to one’s own practices within those fields” (Schirato & Webb, 2002, p. 256). Reflexivity is all encompassing and requires the social scientist to attempt to account for and negotiate their involvement in the production of knowledge (Schirato & Webb, 2002). Reflective judgement is what enables us to “make sense of the unknown, the unexpected, and from the application of this judgement, learn more about the world” (Schirato & Webb, 2002, p. 258). Bourdieu felt uncomfortable reading the work of some sociologists. He was concerned that:

People whose profession it is to objectivize the social world prove so rarely able to objectivize themselves, and fail so often to realize that what their apparently scientific discourse talks about is not the object but their relation to the object (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 68-69).

Bourdieu (in an interview with Wacquant, 1989, p. 55) said that if the sociology he proposes differs in “any significant way from the sociologies of the past and of the present, it is above all in that it continually turns back onto itself the scientific weapons it produces”. Whilst Jenkins (1992, pp. 9-10) is scathing of Bourdieu’s writing style because it is “unnecessarily long-winded, obscure, complex and intimidatory”, he admires Bourdieu’s research process. Jenkins (1992, p. 61) asserts that Bourdieu’s significance lies in the “degree to which he lays open for inspection his work...the process of reflection involved and the interplay between theory, method and epistemology”. In this respect, there are few other sociologists or anthropologists “whose work even comes close” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 61). In recommending the practice of reflexivity, Bourdieu has handed over to others instruments which they “can turn against me to subject me to objectivation – but in so doing, they show that I am right” (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 115).

Conclusion

This chapter has provided details about my philosophical stance and therefore my methodological approach. Narrative inquiry allows me to delve into the subtleties and nuances of the primary material gathered during my fieldwork. The significance and ubiquity of the temporal element has been explained. I have also highlighted the value of applying some of the *thinking tools* of Bourdieu and how the concepts of *practice*, *habitus* and *field* inter-relate. *Hysteresis* is a particularly useful concept as it strongly resonates with my research into how disaster survivors (re)learn how to be and act in the world (Attig, 2005, p. 41). I have also indicated the value of Bourdieu’s writing in understanding the power of language and, from an ethical perspective, his insistence on reflexivity being central to social research.

Bourdieu’s *thinking tools* will feature in Chapter Eight, which documents my interpretation of the bushfire narratives. His concepts, those that enrich my understanding of everyday life and the non-linear process of adapting to a new reality after an unforeseen event, help me to theorise my primary material. Gaining insights into Bourdieu’s way of thinking and how he approached social research has enabled me to extract deeper meaning and texture from the Gippsland narratives. The process of readjusting to unanticipated change at the micro level can potentially, be enhanced or thwarted (or a combination of the two) by the decisions, language and actions imposed by those who operate at the macro level (Government). This project considers how cultural and structural factors (the system) can shape the individual experiences (practices) of bushfire survivors. My paradigm of inquiry provides a solid foundation for the choice of qualitative methods that were used to generate my primary material.

The chapter that follows is focused on the logistics of preparing for and acquiring the twenty-five bushfire narratives that form the core of this study. It contains reflections on my lived experience as an outsider of spending time in the post-bushfire space in the Latrobe Valley, Central Gippsland.

Chapter Four

The Research Process

Narrative analysis is most appropriate when temporal context is central to the investigation. The research question reflects a need to know how change has come about, and/or how persons and groups socially construct how things have happened.

(Hall, 2011, p. 10)

Introduction

Comprised of two parts, this chapter is dedicated to documenting the steps, and sidesteps, I have undertaken in my ‘researcher’ role, as this project evolved over time. The first section focuses on the practical groundwork that occurred before I was ready to commit to a place. It reveals why I decided to conduct my fieldwork in Central Gippsland, how participants were recruited, details about who participated and ethical considerations. The second part of the chapter includes the interviewing, immersion and interpretation processes. I prioritise throughout subjectivity and evoking something of the research experience. Embodied reflexive thinking saturates this chapter, which essentially is all about the *doing*. This chapter aims to provide a solid understanding of the processes underpinning this project.

Part One

Preliminary work

Early in my candidature, which commenced in March 2010, I submitted an application to the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC) seeking Low Risk Ethics approval. I planned to carry out some scoping interviews with people who were either familiar with, or had experiences relevant to, post-disaster spaces.

Once I had secured approval from MUHREC I asked people I knew (through my earlier work in the Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner and the Centre for Risk & Community Safety at RMIT) if they could suggest anyone who might be willing to engage with me during the scoping phase. I met with five people, who were at the time working in a diversity of roles, some of these included:

- An academic who had studied post-war/conflict landscapes and was focused on understanding how people derive meaning from natural and built environments.
- A counsellor whose office was a shipping container in one of the Black Saturday affected locations north of Melbourne.
- A community engagement worker who had previously been employed in a bushfire recovery role (“didn’t lose any homes or lives – mostly infrastructure/landscape”) and this work had “morphed into drought recovery”.

Each person consented to the interviews being recorded. Two of the participants had direct experience of either living in and/or working/volunteering in the post-Black Saturday landscape. Initially we spoke about confidentiality and I stated I would not identify participants in this thesis. These interviews were purely for the purpose of gauging the relevance and direction of my project. The scoping interviews lasted one to one-and-a-quarter hours. Each interview generated notes ranging from three to seven pages in length that I typed whilst listening back to the recordings. This stage of the project proved to be extremely useful, illustrated by the following selection of comments that I have lifted from those interview notes:

It would have been smart politically to decide straight away what parameters we measure success by and that it might not be the number of houses that have been reconstructed. There are factors around whether or not people rebuild that transcend the control of government.

There are some mighty fractured people living in brand new houses so if that’s your only measure of recovery that’s a one dimensional view.

Anecdote: a homeless woman who rebuilt quickly – 1st house to be completed in the township – she promptly moved back into the shed where she had been living temporarily and leased the new house.

Women not living in Marysville/Kinglake have expressed that they feel forgotten/neglected.

This is the surprising thing in lots of ways, **aspects of recovery continue in unexpected ways for a long time** (emphasis added).

People want to ascribe a level of affect to people – there is talk locally about the hierarchy of grief. A profound limiter on how you can work through your issues because of this absolute awareness however mad you are there’s somebody worse.

Important to acknowledge and recognise the post-traumatic growth – people often hesitate to associate positive change with so much distress around them.

In addition to the scoping interviews, I had conversations on the telephone with a few other people and participated, in March 2011, in a workshop run by the Australian Centre for Grief & Bereavement (ACGB). Of the five aspects/elements of grief, emotion, cognition, physical, spiritual/philosophical, environment, it is the first four that are person-focused. I learned that the

environment, within the context of grief, is often neglected and this component is integral to my study that explores how people cope and go on with their lives in profoundly transformed (natural, social, domestic) landscapes.

This preliminary work, inclusive of the scoping interviews, informal conversations and guided visits to fire-affected locations – namely Flowerdale, Taggerty, Marysville and Buxton – helped me gain a ‘feel’ for the post-Black Saturday physical and social landscapes. I was mindful that all of the locations I spent time in fell within the Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Mitchell and Murrindindi. This is where, on 7 February 2009, fires caused the most destruction: 159 fatalities and in excess of 1 800 homes were destroyed. Map 1, below, shows the locations of fire in Victoria on Black Saturday and how the majority of fatalities occurred in relatively close proximity to Melbourne. I was cognisant of, and held concerns about, the sustained media scrutiny and the worn ‘recruitment’ path that researchers had trod before me. Similarly, Cloke, Dickinson and Tupper (2017, p. 1) observed that one consequence of the Christchurch earthquakes of 2010 and 2011 was “the emergence of Christchurch as a kind of research laboratory, subject to internal and external attempts to understand the geophysical, socio-economic and political processes and consequences of the disaster”. I was uneasy about the high probability of ‘research fatigue’ amongst the fire-affected residents.¹⁰ Cloke et al (2017, p. 1) cite “ethical hesitancy” and the desire to avoid “voyeurism and data mining”. I was also mindful of my own ‘self care’ into the future, specifically during the sustained immersion and analysis phase of the project.

Reluctant to conduct interviews in the congested Mitchell and Murrindindi LGAs, I needed to find a location with a lower profile. I am unclear why I didn’t immediately gravitate to Central Gippsland. I had lived and attended Primary School in Gippsland and have family connections there. Because two of the scoping interviewees had offered to assist with recruitment of participants, it is likely that I was reassured of gaining access to established networks to disseminate details about my project.

¹⁰ One of the scoping interviewees, engaged in post-bushfire research, said: “In a focus group of case managers there was annoyance with the way the bushfire survey was conducted – insensitive questions so soon after the fires and leaving surveys in letterboxes standing outside destroyed homes.” This highlights the tension between the ‘macro’, urgently and haphazardly acquiring data, and the ‘micro’ who are in shock and, likely, homeless.



Map 1: Locations of the fires and fatalities in the State of Victoria on Black Saturday¹¹ (Parkinson 2014, p.71)

Making connections in the Latrobe Valley

The Latrobe Valley, in the Central Gippsland region of Victoria, is the geographic focus of this research. The Gunaikurnai people settled in the area over 800 generations ago and lived there “for a time so long that it qualifies, in Western terms, as ‘forever’” (Doig, 2015, p. 38). To the north of the fieldwork site is the Great Dividing Range and to the south are the Strzelecki Ranges. This region is recognised as the centre of the Victorian electricity industry, with one of the largest brown coal reserves in the world. The biggest town, Traralgon, has a population of approximately 22 000 and is a two hour drive east of Melbourne. On 7 February 2009, the Churchill-Jeeralang fire, which began in pine plantation a kilometre south east of Churchill at about 1:30pm, inflicted havoc across the small communities of Callignee, Koornalla, Le Roy, Traralgon South and surrounding areas. The fire destroyed 145 homes and caused 11 fatalities – eight men and three women.¹² It should be noted that “much of the fire was brought to a halt” the following day but due to inaccessible terrain the burning continued and the fire was “not listed as

¹¹ This map refers to ‘West Gippsland’, which is the area of my fieldwork but throughout this thesis the region is cited as ‘Central Gippsland’ (consistent with the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission).

¹² For a more detailed description of the crisis refer to: Appendix F. For a map of the fire perimeter refer to Map 2.

controlled until 18:00 on 19 February” (Teague et al, 2010, p. 137). The threat of fire, in this region of Gippsland, lingered well beyond Black Saturday.

I contacted, via the ACGB website, a woman who had been working with fire-affected people in Gippsland. We spoke on the telephone for over half an hour. She was aware of fire-affected people who had not had an opportunity to tell their story (*I’ve never been asked*). She said, by not being “under the microscope” like other townships within Mitchell and Murrindindi LGAs, it has been “good in some ways but not in others.” Bourdieu, principal theorist in this study, has written about how researchers who are sympathetic and empathetic can enable interviewees to grasp the situation as an “opportunity offered them to testify, to make themselves heard, to carry their experience over from the private to the public sphere” (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 615). I felt encouraged that this was a location where some residents, who might never have been asked, may welcome the chance to share their story. I made contact, again through the internet, with another woman from Traralgon South, who had formed a craft group in direct response to Black Saturday. This craft group, *Stitch & Chat* (Image 2), quickly became my portal into post-bushfire spaces, at the ‘micro’/domestic and ‘meso’/community levels, in the Latrobe Valley.

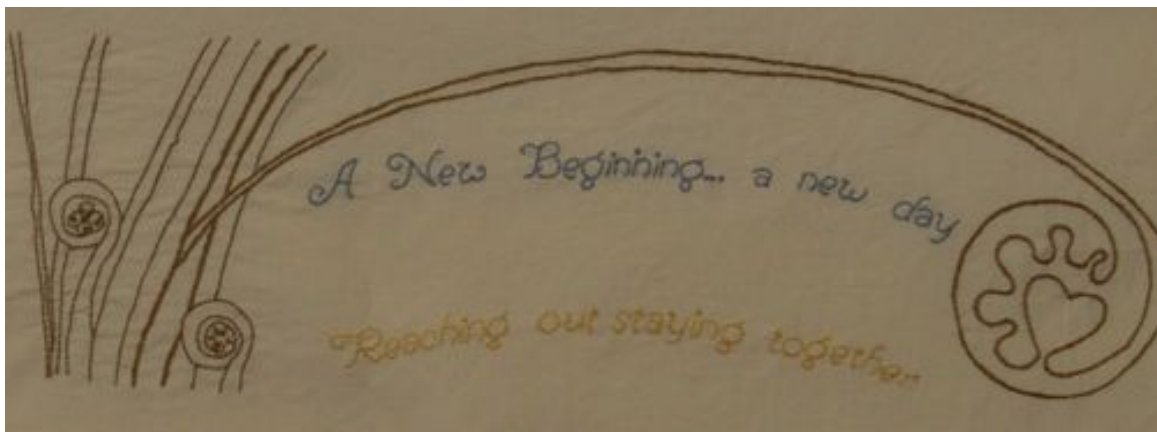


Image 2: *Stitch & Chat* embroidery¹³

Once I had secured High Risk Ethics approval from MUHREC, which permitted me to conduct interviews with people who had survived or been directly affected by the Black Saturday fires, I emailed an ‘Invitation to Participate’ (Appendix B) to Bronwyn, my *Stitch & Chat* contact. She kindly circulated that invitation through her network of local people affiliated with and separate to the craft group. I had provided Bronwyn with a copy of a journal paper dating back to my time in South Australia (Proudley, 2008). It was helpful to have a short piece of published writing that encapsulated my qualitative research approach and genuine interest in exploring the complex

¹³ View at http://brendaryan.typepad.com/brenda_ryan_embroidery_de/2011/10/calligee-lets-stitch-it-togetherwonderful-daycountry-style-hospitality.html

post-bushfire space. This earlier research assisted me greatly whilst I was establishing connections in the Latrobe Valley and throughout the recruiting and interviewing stages of my study.

I familiarised myself with the Final Report of the *2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission* (Teague et al, 2010) and I read the nine statements from Central Gippsland residents detailing their account of Black Saturday and its repercussions. Anja Toikka's words resonated strongly with my research focus, loss of possessions/connection to place. Anja described her five-acre property in Callignee where she has lived since 1997 before it was destroyed by the fires. She was asked: *You named it Herran Kukkaro. What does that mean?*

Herran Kukkaro word-by-word is 'God's little coin purse,' but we in Finland we say if a place is like what we would think is a **paradise** or what is the most to our liking, we call that Herran Kukkaro and that is what I called this place (emphasis added).

Further into her statement Anja mentioned the transformation of her natural/built environment and how that had affected, or tainted, her 'sense of place':

...before the fires, a lot of the houses were old farming houses and it still looked like the countryside. Now a lot of those houses have burnt and people are rebuilding huge multi-storey mansions. Unfortunately, I think that it will be like living in the suburbs in no time. The area is losing its character. It is not the place that we wanted to move to anymore. (Transcript of Anja Toikka, 2010, by personal communication).

I made contact with Anja in March 2011 (her details were on the public record). We had a long conversation on the telephone; she referred to Callignee as *the forgotten place* and said she feels that it has become clearer over time what has been lost – it is now “more painful” and she “can’t see a way to recreate that life.”¹⁴ Time, how it does not necessarily ‘heal’, and the life cycle were at the heart of her reflections about the non-linear way that she is coping in the wake of the crisis.

Recruiting and description of participants

In addition to Bronwyn's distribution of my 'Invitation to Participate', I recruited participants through two established networks; the local branch of the Country Women's Association (CWA) and a playgroup. I also utilised community noticeboards at the General Store in Traralgon South

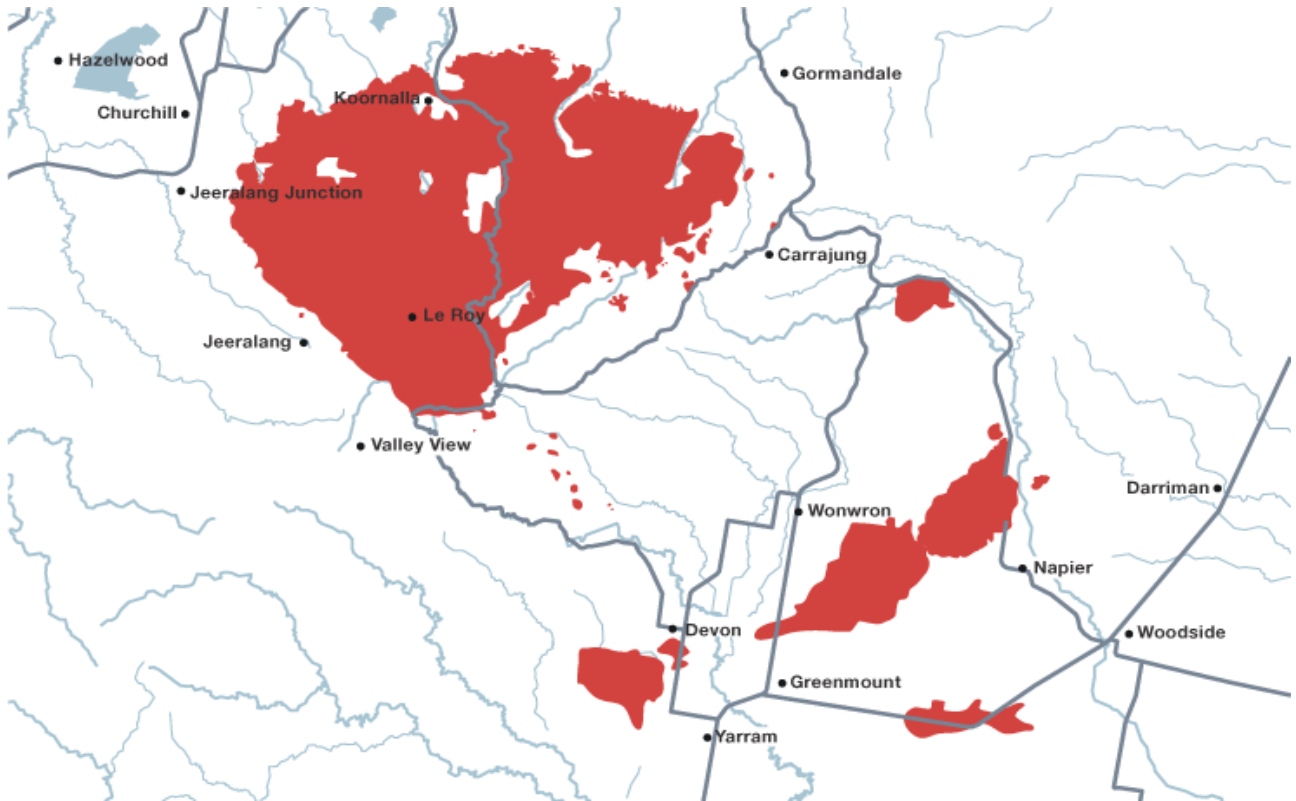
¹⁴ Notes from our phone call: “Anja said she'd be happy to walk me around her property and chat but doesn't want to be interviewed. She will tell me when she doesn't want to talk about something. I will be guided by her.” Our conversation was a reminder that Witness Statements, and recorded interviews, are static and don't necessarily reflect, or inform, the present or future. This is the temporal element of this work. I did spend three or four hours with Anja on her property before I completed my 25 interviews. I treated this as a social visit, removing my 'researcher' hat at her front gate.

and the Gippsland campus of Monash (now Federation) University in the town of Churchill to extend the invitation more widely. People who had seen these notices or heard, through others, about my project and expressed interest in participating contacted me, either by email or on the telephone. I had prior to commencing the interviews, recruited nine participants (eight females, one male) and this number grew during my time in the region; people either got in touch with their friends/neighbours or suggested who I might approach for an interview. Stehlik (2004, p. 43) regards this accumulation of participants as allowing the study to become “a living, dynamic process”.

Across the interviewees there were variations in age (ranging from mid/late 20s – 70 years), socio-economic status, occupation and length of residence in the region prior to the crisis. Family structure and cultural background, consistent with the LGA’s 2016 Census data, was less diverse. None of the 33 participants were Indigenous¹⁵ and the three interviewees who were born in other countries were from Poland and the Netherlands¹⁶. In relation to land size and use: there were many two to five acre blocks on the urban fringe; several hobby farmers on small holdings (six to sixteen acres) and a few part-time farmers with larger land holdings (115-120 acres). The only full-time farmer I interviewed worked 500 acres of land. Similar to the South Australian research I had conducted years prior, more women (20) than men (13) shared their reflections of living in, or being displaced from, a post-bushfire landscape. The groups established pre/post-bushfire that were active in the community and assisted me by circulating the ‘Invitation to Participate’ were all female, which mirrored the higher participation rate of women in this study. It was clear to me that women were crucial in the recruitment phase of this research. I acquired the male perspective via the females I had reached out to using the internet (*Stitch & Chat*), phoning organisations (such as the ACGB) or word of mouth (within the CWA, local playgroup and initial contacts). Just under half (16) of the interviewees had been made homeless by the fires.

¹⁵ According to the ABS, 1.6% of the Latrobe Valley (LGA) population is comprised of Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the average age of that cohort is 21 years.
http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/LGA23810?opendocument

¹⁶ Australian cities are substantially more diverse than regional, rural and remote locations.



Map 2: Fire perimeter of the Churchill-Jeeralang fire in Central Gippsland.¹⁷

Interviews as primary material

The 25 open-ended interviews, along with informal discussions and observations, were conducted throughout May 2011 during two separate weeklong visits.¹⁸ The longest interview exceeded two-and-a-half hours whilst the shortest lasted fifty-four minutes. The bulk of the interviews ran for approximately one-and-a-half hours.¹⁹ During the interviews, I relied on broad themes (disruption/displacement, loss, post-bushfire decision-making and post-traumatic growth/transformation) rather than a specific set of questions. In previous bushfire research (Proudley, 2008) I found that interviews flowed and were most fruitful when they were free of a rigid sequence of questions. The approach I used in this current study, lying somewhere between semi-structured and unstructured interviewing, provided flexibility that enabled exploration of fascinating tangents when they emerged. Boschetti writes:

¹⁷ Accessed March 2018 at http://royalcommission.vic.gov.au/Finaldocuments/volume-1/PF/VBRC_Vol1_Chapter09_PF.pdf

¹⁸ Personal circumstances prevented me from lingering longer in the field.

¹⁹ See Appendix D for exact interview durations and details of participants who were all assigned a pseudonym.

The absence of a priori structuring in the interview process allows participants to freely and fully share their feelings and thoughts about the topic and to carry the conversation to areas of greatest import to them (1995, p. 3).

How the primary material was generated, through these loose, open-ended interviews, aligned with the theoretical framework of my study. Ideally, the interviewee-interviewer relationship evolves into that of narrator-listener (Chase, 2011, cited in Netolicky, 2016, pp. 25-26).

The season autumn is important. It is common for people who have survived or been affected by bushfire to experience a heightened sense of concern or anxiety as subsequent bushfire seasons approach. In Victoria the bushfire season commences in October and extends through to April – generally peaking in the summer months of December, January and February. As already stated in Chapter Two, as the climate has changed over time the Victorian bushfire season has stretched into spring and autumn. Interviewing survivors of Black Saturday during the cooler weather was a conscious decision. I felt that reflecting on a traumatic experience associated with high temperatures and gusty winds would be stressful enough without any additional uneasiness triggered by the weather. The rich Latrobe Valley interviews, amounting to 35 hours and 45 minutes of audio recording and in excess of 900 pages of transcripts, forms the backbone of this thesis.

Part Two

Interviewing and place

Where possible, I wanted to see the former home sites of those who were displaced and did not rebuild. Cass, who lived in a purchased house in Traralgon with her family, was interviewed in a cafe. This was the only instance where I did not observe or interact with the participant's current dwelling or former home (or land where their home once stood). Cass was one of the most vocal about her dislike of Traralgon. The background noise, a cacophony on the digital recording of this interview, mirrors her annoyance and frustration with being forced to reside in an urban environment. What is evident in her interview, and other participants who were wrestling with their profoundly changed circumstances, is the rawness of the rupturing event echoed here. There were two other occasions where I did not directly observe the relationship between the participant and his/her current domestic space: Adam was interviewed in his parent's home where he had been living at the time of the crisis and immediately afterwards and Robyn was interviewed in the recently rebuilt Callignee Hall. I encountered Robyn's domestic space when, deeper into the fieldwork, I interviewed her husband in their makeshift accommodation.

It was helpful to get a ‘feel’ for the new houses and witness the participant’s relationship or interaction with it. Kristina showed me her ‘scrapbook’, which she had used as a form of therapy and also as a practical way to collate her ideas and thoughts for the unanticipated building project. Long before the new house was completed Kristina was thinking about and planning their new domestic space. Kristina, at the time of the interview, continued to be completely enraptured by her family’s new home. The extreme opposite of that positive response was the ‘For Sale’ sign at the front gate of Lisa’s rebuilt home; a public display of unsettledness.

Two interviews prompted me to reflect on the stark disparity between my circumstances and those of the participants. The first was one of the most memorable interview locations with Pete, the only interviewee who witnessed his home, which he had built by hand over many years, burn to the ground. I was greeted by Pete’s two dogs and sat inside what was initially his temporary ‘shed’. Pete had lived in a donated caravan whilst he built a modest one-room structure, which slowly evolved into a permanent two bedroom home. He was in the throes of navigating the local Council’s red tape in order to secure a ‘Certificate of Occupancy’. The bond he had with his land – his place – was probably the most compelling that I encountered during my fieldwork. He owned very little and yet expressed contentment with living on his sixteen acres.

Place embedded itself in my interview with Colin, who was living temporarily in a shed, fitted out with furniture sourced from eBay. When our paths crossed he was mid-way through rebuilding the family home. It was quite sobering to see and get a feel for the living conditions that he and his wife Robyn lived in. During the interview he caught two mice. This couple were at the time, facing a third winter living in a shed with an out door toilet and shower. Robyn was undergoing chemotherapy during the time I was conducting my fieldwork. Witnessing the stress, inconvenience and discomfort, for the brief duration of an interview, provides useful insights into the *glacial nature of bushfire/disaster ‘recovery’ at the coalface*. The chasm between the living circumstances of the interviewee and I, the interviewer, was most apparent during this encounter. I was cognisant of my undisrupted, comfortable middle class life. Three other participants Hanna, Erik and Marilyn had lived in sheds during the rebuilding of their new houses and one couple Leon and Irena had lived for several months in a caravan on their burnt land. By the time I conducted my fieldwork in excess of two years after Black Saturday, they were all residing in conventional rebuilt or purchased houses. The domestic interior and surroundings where the interview takes place, which can sometimes indicate socioeconomic status, can also subtly contribute to the relationship or dynamic between the interviewee and the

interviewer.²⁰ How the interview ‘feels’ to the interviewer once it is completed can be swayed by multiple factors, which will be continually explored in this chapter.

When I conducted the interviews I was meeting the participants (with exception of the two that occurred in public places and Adam who no longer lived in his parent’s home) in their current domestic space. Those who had been displaced had often experienced multiple moves prior to our interview. I am aware that two participants, Paul and Lisa, have more recently sold their rebuilt houses and relocated outside the fire-affected area. Often I would need to remind myself that I had no reference point for their pre-bushfire landscape. I could not begin to appreciate the natural landscape that some of the interviewees yearned for; I’d carried out the interviews when the regeneration was well advanced. I could only tune into the post-bushfire landscape and how people described what it felt like to return to a silent and predominantly grey and black surrounding before the re-growth and regeneration began.

Whilst I was gathering primary material, I was conscious of the higher participation rate of middle aged and older people, which meant I had substantially less material from a younger perspective. Housing tenure is a key factor in post-bushfire decision-making and I was keen to obtain insights from renters. This did not eventuate. The absence of renters in this study may simply be a reflection of the high rate of home ownership, or low rate of renting in the region.²¹ This reinforces the need to consider who **did not** participate in this research. The act of engaging in research of this nature requires a person to feel far enough along the non-linear ‘recovery’ path to speak openly about their post-disaster lives. Who was not interviewed, absent perspectives, deserves reflection. This idea, *the meaning behind absent voices* and the hardship confronted by renters, is explored in greater detail towards the tail end of Chapter Eight.

Background noise was not restricted to interviews that took place in public places. The daily realities of domestic life contributed to the atmosphere and content, in a small number of the interviews. Children or grandchildren were wrangled for short or sustained intervals; phone calls and knocks on the door were answered. Whilst there were some distractions, in the main this raw element enriched the content of the Gippsland narratives. Two of the interviews (with Colin and Pete) that took place in sheds (temporary and permanent respectively) were interrupted by phone

²⁰ I did not ask any questions about the participant’s financial circumstances/income/assets – some participants talked at length about the financial strains associated with the crisis including the lack or low level of insurance and the cost of rebuilding.

²¹ The ABS 2016 Census confirms that home ownership rates in the smaller towns/townships where I carried out my interviews, and where Traralgon based interviewees had been displaced from, have a substantially lower renting population (Traralgon South: 2%; Callignee: 6%) comparative to Victoria (28.7%) and Australia (30.9%) viewed August 2017 at <http://www.abs.gov.au/census>.

calls about rebuilding. In these situations, ongoing seemingly relentless post-disaster challenges and frustration unfolded in the midst of talking about these same themes.²² Surrendering to the spontaneous element of interviewing is a crucial part of this inquiry; the researcher's or narrative inquirer's role is to trust that some of the information being recorded will be useful and relevant. In real time I was able to grasp the *insufficiency of conventional language* for describing complicated post-disaster realities. This chequered nature of interviewing, within intimate domestic spaces, contributed notably to the findings that were generated by this qualitative study, and the overall 'feel' of the project.

Reading and listening – reducing the narratives

The 25 interviews were transcribed verbatim (Image 3). Bourdieu (1999, p. 622) refers to the “impoverished ordinary tools of punctuation” that strip the interview of “everything that often gives the real meaning and the real interest”. A transcription conceals the rich elements of the interview, including the “voice, pronunciation...intonation, rhythm (each interview has its own tempo which is not that of reading), gesture, gesticulations and body language, etc” (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 622). During the analysis phase of this work, I always engaged with, and moved constantly between, the audio recording and transcription of each interview. This chapter details some of the many fascinating elements that were produced by the “interaction between the investigator and the person being questioned” (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 607) which cannot be conveyed by transcription alone.



Image 3: Transcriptions of the 25 Gippsland interviews.

²² The recording device was paused for the duration of all telephone calls.

Coding and core concepts

Coding the primary material using narrative methods is a time intensive task. Codes “consist of short labels that we construct as we interact with the data” (Charmaz, 2012, p. 5). I quickly learned that the time length of the interview is no clear indication of how long the coding process might take. Some of the shorter interviews feature participants who speak rapidly and one of the longer interviews was with a woman Jude who spoke at a significantly slower pace. I took as long as was necessary to thoroughly immerse myself in the audio recordings and written transcripts – identifying commonalities and peripheral perspectives. I created a simple template comprised of three columns; the ‘code’, ‘the words of the interviewee’, and ‘my comments’ (Appendix E). In the ‘comments’ column I highlighted interesting words/insights/interactions and noted questions that I wanted to return to as the analysis progressed.

At this point in the project, I often referred to my Fieldwork Journal, which contained observations, ideas and thoughts (memos) I had written down immediately after each interview and throughout my time in and away from the Latrobe Valley. Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 9) refer to field records as “one of the primary tools of narrative inquiry work”. These memos assisted me to bridge the temporal distance between when the interviews were conducted (2011) and when they were analysed (2012/13).²³ Memo writing, which constitutes the “pivotal intermediate step between coding data and writing the first draft of the analysis”, occupies a central role in this work on suffering, grief and transformation (Charmaz, 2012, p. 376).

Underneath the coded template for each interview I wrote additional comments, generally half to two pages in length, reflecting on the coding experience.²⁴ Examples of the nature of these comments follow:

This was the quickest coding task to date, for several reasons: I’m familiar with this interview, it is the shortest interview and she speaks clearly and not too quickly.

This is an information dense interview – full of strong opinions, thoughts and criticisms. The recovery effort is heavily criticised. His comments about attachment to possessions, the difference between large landholders and others (in relationship to ‘sense of place’/place attachment) is interesting.

I recorded a list of all the codes that had surfaced from each interview. An example of the quantity of codes from one of the interviews included: *Home, Black Saturday, Returning to*

²³ I did not use any software to assist me with the coding/analysis of the interview transcripts. There are pros/cons with both options (utilising available software or not). I felt that a computational approach did not fit with the paradigmatic stance of this research (Netolicky, 2016, p. 89).

²⁴ See Appendix E: Sample of Interview Coding.

nothing, Possessions, Displaced, Decision-making, Friendship, Being positive, Children, Media, Accepting help, Change, New home, Work, Healing, Recovery, Royal Commission, Case Manager, Relationships, Gender, Re-growth. The final documents produced by this process ranged in length from 7 to 33 pages (Image 4).

Once the coding was completed I then ‘themed’ the primary material (‘thematic sense-making’). A ‘theme’ is “an *outcome* of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 175, emphasis in original). I then collapsed the multitude of themes into five core concepts:

- everyday sensory practices
- home
- language
- possessions
- time

These concepts assisted me with framing, and writing, the three findings chapters of this thesis (Chapters Five, Six and Seven).

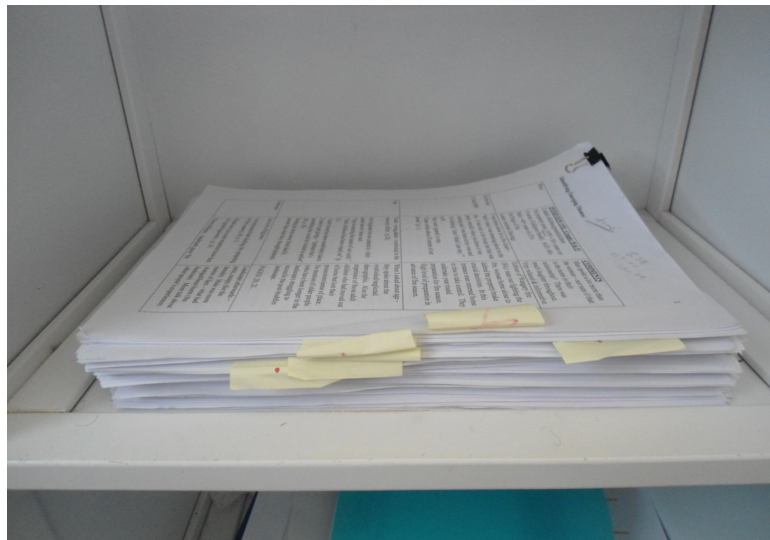


Image 4: More primary material: the completed reduction process.

The telling

During the analysis phase of this study it was essential to “go beyond the ‘what’ is said to ‘how’ it is said” (Riessman, 1989, p. 750). When I came to code my interview with Jude I was surprised by how difficult it was to comprehend in places. In my Coding Notes I wrote:

She switches back and forth in time...It touches on her relationship with her husband – how they each approach decision-making differently. I found this interview challenging to code – her speech drifts in and out of tenses and **it's impossible to separate out into neat categories.**²⁵

I met Jude in the second house the couple had purchased in Traralgon after their home in Traralgon South was destroyed. This was also the most emotionally taxing interview to code. Jude had anticipated that after the first anniversary of the bushfire “...everything would be fine”. She felt betrayed by this self-imposed milestone (amplified in the media by political discourse). In my Coding Notes I wrote: “I’m not sure if I appreciated, during the interview, how this participant was feeling *in the moment*”. She had repeated, early in the interview that “it was harder in the second year”. I asked what she did on the second anniversary: “I just went [to a service in Traralgon South] and came home and I don’t know, I was just a little bit – like **the feeling I have now** just thinking about that was pretty **numb**. Yeah, I wasn’t emotional at all”. There is a unique element within this interview: Jude’s voice changes in volume and in strength. She spoke for the longest, of all the participants, uninterrupted:

...during the first long sequence of speech – over 7 minutes of stream of consciousness – she sounds exhausted or unwell. It is as if, and it probably was, it is a real effort to recall and talk about this painful experience. And I only register this when I hear her voice sound stronger and more alive in other sections of the interview (Coding Notes).

I didn’t encounter this with any other participant: “...certain topics are recalled in almost a whisper (decisions around house buying/selling the vacant land/feeling unsettled) whilst others (less stressful?) are communicated in a more robust voice” (Coding Notes). In my Coding Notes I wrote: “It feels like she is putting a jig-saw puzzle together and talks though each piece. It is the most considered speech pattern that I have encountered”. What is made clear by Jude, and a few other interviewees who were made homeless, is that the interview has triggered memories: “I could have got lots of artwork off the walls, and I mean *this is the first time I’m actually thinking of things that I haven’t thought of before*, it’s weird isn’t it?” (Jude). This is one of many interviews where objects, meaningful possessions, feature prominently and the grief from comprehensive loss is deep and intense. This interview was conducted in the evening, ending just before 9 pm. Jude had been working all day and I had completed two interviews already – fatigue played a role in this encounter.

²⁵ An aside: as I revise and polish this chapter, I am surprised by my surprise. I decide to retain my surprise as it illustrates yet another temporal element within this work. My confusion whilst coding was potentially a symptom of not fully appreciating the intensity of prolonged turmoil. When a home, with all it contains and represents, is obliterated by fire in life-threatening circumstances, it is not conducive to coherence. Why would an interviewee share a neat, linear, story about their post-Black Saturday life?

Duty-of-care

Jude's comment about thinking of meaningful possessions for the first time, links with the researcher's duty-of-care to each participant and the need to consider how he/she might *feel*, not just during the interview but in the hours and days afterwards. Morrice (2014) delves into the sensitivities of conducting research within post-disaster spaces. Ideally, the researcher finds a balance "between seeking to enhance knowledge of post-disaster populations and research that protects the rights of individual human research subjects" (Morrice, 2014, p. 104). In my ethics application, and at the beginning of each interview, I emphasised that participants could withdraw from the study at any time. A significant number of participants had received either written or verbal information about my research prior to our interview. The Explanatory Statement (Appendix C) was offered to each participant in advance of or at the beginning of our interview.²⁶ That document contained information about risk:

The risk of discomfort is quite high due to the traumatic and sensitive subject matter – the Black Saturday bushfires and how that extreme event affected you and your family. This particular research project focuses on loss of home/possessions and loss of connection to place...I am interested to learn about how you navigated your way through the short and medium term recovery process and whether you can anticipate any long term needs or whether you have already identified what they are/might be.

I was made aware, before we met, of two participants who had been cajoled by family members to consent to an interview. I was careful on both occasions and throughout my time in the Latrobe Valley, that I was respectful and aware of potential for emotional fragility. In the main, I found that people were willing and some expressed gratitude about having an opportunity to share their story about the dramatic divergence of their lives as a result of Black Saturday.

Words – theirs and mine

Whilst engaged with the 'reduction' process it was useful to linger on the words and expressions that recurred within and between interviews. Two participants who shared similar circumstances – made homeless on Black Saturday, a baby born soon after, the stress of inappropriate accommodation whilst rebuilding - used the same word: 'hard.' The female interviewee, Hanna, said 'hard' in excess of 30 times during the 58 minutes of our conversation. I wrote in the Coding Notes: "I noticed I started to talk in a similar way (making her or me or both of us more comfortable?). She uses the words 'yeah' ('Yeah, it kind of was hard') and 'like' ('Like we've put trees along the fence') quite frequently and those are the two words that crept into my speech

²⁶ Few participants showed interest in, or asked any questions about, the ethical component of the research.

during the interview”. I’m not sure that either she or I noticed at the time but it was obvious early into the coding of her interview. This was the only occasion where I discovered I had as the interviewer modified my natural style of speaking.

The male participant Paul said the word ‘hard’ more than 25 times during the interview, which lasted 72 minutes. The futility of his situation – being financially worse off and living in what he described as a ‘sterile’ house – was clearly articulated:

When I listen back to this interview I hear pain and struggle. This man has been severely bruised by profound loss due to bushfire. He has regrets – around the decision-making in the immediate aftermath of the fires. He is reflective when he weighs them up. (Coding Notes)

It is worth noting how he talks. Often it is challenging to decide when a sentence has finished and when a new one has begun. Often there are no neat endings to a thought/idea. Occasionally he pauses and leaps onto another topic mid-way through a thought. I am not sure if this is how he talks in everyday life – pausing and then words tumbling out – or whether it is a style of speech triggered by the ‘interview’? (Coding Notes)

Whilst I was coding Kristina’s interview I extracted some of her distinctive phrases:

“We all have our suitcase with luggage.”

“That was my scream for the house.”

“It’s like ants to watch.” (Referring to the speed of the recovery response.)

“But it’s something I can’t carry.” (Referring to negative responses to her new home.)

“There was lights again, and sound again, and movement. Life.” (Returning)

It was a combination of English being her second language and also her personality – how she thought in her own unique way about overcoming adversity. I wrote:

My memory of this interview is that there was light heartedness/laughter but on listening back there are many quiet moments of reflection and where you might anticipate laughter (she grabbed alcohol before fleeing the fire) there is none. She speaks all through this – about the confusion of leaving the house for the last time – in a soft, serious voice. (Coding Notes)

The interview with Pete who witnessed his uninsured home burn was challenging to code:

He says ‘yep,’ ‘yeah’ a fair bit and there are times when sentences are started and paused and re-started. His speech is not always clear. The long, extended pauses and the level of emotion are distinctive. This was one of the most emotional interviews – how taxing it is to reflect on and talk about the trauma of the day and the losses that reverberate through his present and future is evident. He’s not in shock but talking about his experience – particularly about the goats – is painful. I’m aware of the upsetting nature of this research. (Coding Notes)

During that interview I had not registered the ratio of my speech to his speech; this became clear when I immersed myself in the recording:

I ask a lot of questions. In some interviews participants flag or raise subjects off their own bat. It is, in the main, me that introduces new topics to Pete. A lot of our exchanges (in contrast to other interviews) are brief. With this interviewee his solitariness (age and gender figure here too) is a factor – he lives alone and I’m uncertain about whether he has spoken at length with his friends and neighbours. (Coding Notes)

It is worth noting the words I didn’t record, which couldn’t be coded. Len, the largest landholder in the most remote location I visited, revealed the full details of his Black Saturday experience after the digital recorder was switched off, he nearly perished. It was getting dark and I was walking out to the car when he said that he drove into a burning log and had to abandon his vehicle. Len was out in the open, surrounded by fire – a worst-case scenario and probably the most terrifying experience that was related to me during my fieldwork. I had to write down notes from memory once I had returned to my accommodation. During the interview he had been vague about what happened on the day and I did not press him for details. I rarely asked about the interviewee’s Black Saturday experience. I found that the participant revealed, in their own time, as much or as little of the day as they were comfortable. Sometimes it was where an interview began and much was said whilst in other instances the events of the day amounted to a smattering of words. This possibly illustrates for some of the participants that the ‘disaster’ was what unfolded after the bushfire threat had receded. I was from the outset most interested in the **afterwards**; *the magnitude of change and disruption in people’s everyday lives*, the social/natural transformations that occurred in the wake of Black Saturday. I felt neutral about acquiring details of the disaster. Again, my prior interviewing experience in South Australia (Proudley, 2008) and my reading of the transcripts from the VBRC meant that I was familiar with traumatic stories of bushfire survival.

Returning to words not recorded, I wrote about a similar experience with another male participant Reuben, in my Fieldwork Journal:

What he said after the interview was over (when the digital recorder was switched off) was interesting – particularly about his relationship [with his wife] which had strengthened post-fire. He said he appreciated what his wife is capable of.

I didn’t have a chance to clarify that point – it might have been the daunting administrative and physical work they tackled together following Black Saturday that revealed capabilities he hadn’t previously had insight into. A comment by Finlay (2013, p.84) is relevant here: *In this space, it can be hard to disentangle what belongs to ourselves, what to others*. Reuben’s relationship with his wife was strengthened. Karen, whose husband wanted to relocate despite their home remaining intact, felt her marriage begin to unravel. These anecdotes, *coming from the non-displaced perspective*, offer insights into the profound and ongoing affects that bushfire

can have on people's intimate relationships, family functioning and sensory (dis)comfort. Within this study's sample Karen's situation was unique. It would be fascinating to learn how common, across the many fire-affected regions of Victoria, relocating was (or is in the future) for non-displaced households.²⁷

Expressive intensity

In two instances with female interviewees who were made homeless and were a similar age, I wasn't able to finish asking my question.

Sequence One:

Mae: What did it feel like to be?

Kristina: Terrible. Because you don't dare to ask and the lady who sat on the other side of the table she asked me all these questions....

Sequence Two:

Mae: What is it like living in an environment where

Cass: Horrible. (laughter)

Mae: It's horrible?

Cass: Living in town. Horrible.

In my Coding Notes for the latter interview, which was conducted in the cafe, I wrote that the word 'horrible' "shot out like a rocket". Both women, who were interviewed on the same day, expressed their feelings passionately and without hesitation. They were aware of the theme I was talking to and felt strongly about their experience (of receiving donated essentials and living in town respectively). These examples resonate with Bourdieu's reference to the "density and intensity" of their (respondents) speech and how an interview can offer an opportunity for a participant to "give vent, at times with an extraordinary *expressive intensity*" (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 615, emphasis in original).

Cass, who said it was "horrible" living in town, repeats phrases or sentences almost like an echo, which seem to reinforce the depth and currency of her feelings: "I didn't expect the house to be gone. I didn't expect the house to be gone". "It's just unreal and we can't work it out. Can't work it out". Her style of speech had a haunting affect. I had a strong sense that the passing of time, in excess of two years (which I know now is barely any time at all), had no correlation to her

²⁷ It would also be interesting to learn from people who decide to relocate into a post-disaster landscape. I encountered numerous women at a Playgroup who had recently moved into the region – a reminder of social change after disaster.

comprehension of the harrowing way in which her life, and the lives of her immediate family, had deviated so far from her/their anticipated future.

Relationships – within and outside the interviews

As an outsider and not having any prior connection to the Latrobe Valley community, I met the majority of the participants on one occasion for the purpose of conducting an interview. The opportunity to glean insights from them was fleeting. Seven of the 25 interviews were conducted with married couples. Of the eighteen other interviews all except one were with an individual. The exception was with Kate and for a short section of the interview her adult daughter, Neve, was present and shared her insights. I allowed the participants to guide whether couples would be interviewed separately or together. In two of the interviews with couples the male noticeably dominated and it is unknown whether it was due to their extensive experience and knowledge about bushfire or simply the dynamic of the relationship. The men took charge on Black Saturday and appeared to again during the interview. Whilst coding an interview, 84 minutes in length, where that dynamic occurred I wrote:

What I regret is not paying more attention to, or giving more opportunity for the woman to speak. I was actually more intrigued by what she said (and didn't get to say). There's a little bit of over-talking where one (usually the woman) is not being heard. It is worth noting that she was absent at two intervals – answering the phone (brief) and making her husband a coffee (pages 22 – 26 of the transcript) – gender roles play a part here.

There was one interview where the wife Jackie, initiated contact with me; she wanted her husband to participate in the study. He agreed, and upon my arrival at their home Jackie physically retreated. She returned to us about two thirds of the way through. Her strong views contributed a great deal in a small window of time. Jackie injected passion into the interview and as she was socially connected to the neighbourhood there were moments where her husband Alan, was learning – by asking her questions – which resulted in a fascinating exchange.

The first line recorded in an interview, which lasted 100 minutes, with an older couple made homeless on Black Saturday was: *We go to a marriage counsellor not a fire person*. Leon and Irena's relationship issues nearly dominated the interview; their digressions and banter required me to be persistent, when it was appropriate, with my questions. There were times when a question I had directed at one partner was answered swiftly by the other. In the Coding Notes generated by that interview I wrote:

A few weeks shy of their 50th Wedding Anniversary, from my encounter with them their relationship is defined by opposition. The way they bicker and disagree throughout the interview –

something you wouldn't capture interviewing them individually – seems to form the foundation of their relationship. At times there was a sarcastic undertone from the husband directed at his wife.

When I referred back to my Fieldwork Notes, I had written that I was “torn about interviewing them together but think it was good to capture their contrasting feelings on their living arrangements”. Irena had wanted, for years, to move out of their Callignee home and the bushfire helped her achieve that goal. She was the only person I encountered who was happy to live in Traralgon permanently. In my Fieldwork Notes I emphasised that her husband “seems to have struggled emotionally but I didn't manage to explore this as deeply as I'd hoped.” Irena was more accepting of the comprehensive loss and her living circumstances. As the couple were interviewed together we skated over the surface of Leon's ongoing struggle with his profoundly changed circumstances and how his retirement plans had been destroyed; this intersects with his sense of identity and life cycle (time).

In the Coding Notes of another older male participant, who was interviewed separately to his wife, I wrote:

What I did not capture, and that is the downside of interviewing separately, is the dynamic of this couple who have been married for over 35 years. It would have been interesting to observe that. I wonder who would have talked more, whether they would have been in agreement and so on....

Sometimes the negatives of interviewing a couple together are outweighed by the benefits but until you are in the interview or have completed it you cannot appreciate which is the better scenario.

The weight of silence and the 'silent wait'

Throughout this chapter, and the study as a whole, I have reinforced that the *nuances* are significant and mostly neglected within the official, or 'macro', disaster 'recovery' space. Silence is a striking component of the Gippsland narratives. In my Coding Notes, referring to Jude, who was deeply unsettled and living in a purchased house in Traralgon, I wrote:

What this interview reinforces is the value of silence. There are more silences in this interview than any other. What do you hear in the silences? What does silence say?

Josselson (2007, p. 547, emphasis added) believes: “***We listen people into speech***”. Sitting with and allowing the silences to elapse during the interview was critical. When I was coding Erik's interview I noted that “...his sentences drift off into silence...there is a lot of sadness here, in his tone of voice and the words”. When an interviewee is visibly upset, often the natural instinct is to paper over the silences or minimise them – occasionally I had to make a conscious effort to be quiet and allow space and time for silence. It can sometimes, feel counterintuitive and

particularly so in the context of my ‘duty of care’ to each participant. Speedy (2013, p. 28) refers to a “deeply inhabited silence.” I too found I was not “keeping silent, but keeping the silences as data” (Mazzei, 2007, cited in Speedy 2013, p. 28). Silence, in conjunction with the sighs that were noted during my analysis of the interviews, further reinforced *the limitations of conventional language*. For quite a few of the participants, there were no words to sufficiently express how they felt about their comprehensively ruptured lives (past, present and future). Hence, in a few interviews, there were multiple prolonged silences. Occasionally, after I have asked a question, the silence might constitute thinking time for the participant/s but, more often it conveyed *there are no words*. Bourdieu writes about the “silent wait” that can follow the researcher’s question or suggestion and how the task of clarification, occurring throughout the interview, can result in a “simultaneously gratifying and painful” sharing of “experiences and thoughts long kept unsaid or repressed” (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 615). This weight of silence ties in with Bourdieu’s tendency for reviving old words or creating new words that *resonate with reality* instead of relying on worn out, meaningless, words ascribed by bureaucrats.²⁸

Laughter

During the coding process I made a note of whether laughter occurred, the context of it and at what point in the interview. For one male participant Colin, all his laughter, on seven occasions, happened towards the middle and end of our one-hour interview. I found that Colin’s language changed as the interview progressed – he swore more frequently:

At some point the level of warmth goes up a notch. Maybe I was intimidated – he has strong views and talks like an authority figure. Maybe me being a woman? There’s certainly some value in reflecting on the dynamic in this interview – the power relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. I need the interviewee to share very personal experiences (for my own personal gain). Not having met them before can work in your favour but you have a small window of time to capture their insights (Coding Notes).

Charmaz (2014, p. 73) writes:

If interviewers take on the role of the interested learner rather than, say, the distant investigator, they open spaces for their research participants to be the experts on their lives.

There were across the 25 interviews variations in the type of laughter. From big belly laughs to sarcastic and scornful laughter – often there was laughter where you least expected it. There was no correlation between the levels of loss and the frequency or infrequency of the laughter. In the Coding Notes for Pete, who was uninsured, I commented on the quantity of laughter: “...quite a

²⁸ Refer to Chapter Four for more details about Bourdieu’s application of language.

lot given the circumstances”. In some interviews laughter punctuates our speech all the way through, in others laughter is non-existent. I was surprised at the amount of laughter and also surprised when immersing myself in the audio recordings that it wasn’t occurring with one participant where I remembered it to be. The subject matter, of disruption and loss after disaster is sobering, but humour for some people can play a significant role in healing and acceptance.

Images and mementoes

As stated earlier in this chapter, an added element to the fieldwork was my sensory responses to the participants and the environments in which the interviews took place. I was guided around the properties prior to or after a few of the interviews; tuning into the sights, sounds and smells of the external post-bushfire landscape. Two interviewees made homeless on Black Saturday, Kristina and Pete, expressed happiness with their domestic spaces and gave me a tour of their homes that had been rebuilt on their fire-affected land. In regards to the other participants who had either rebuilt or relocated to Traralgon, I only saw the entry and the room where the interview took place.

During the interviews I was frequently shown photographs. Some participants possessed ‘before’ and ‘after’ photos whilst a few only possessed images from ‘after’ Black Saturday. The inability to produce ‘before’ photos was visibly frustrating or upsetting for two participants who were made homeless. There were times when the search for a specific image, or the viewing of them disrupted the flow of the interview. In my Fieldwork Notes I wrote: “I find when photographs are shown during the interview it can distract or prematurely shift the conversation on...this happened on several occasions (the interviewee spent time sifting through and seeking out particular photos)”. One participant gave me a CD of images she, or members of her family, had taken in the days and weeks after the bushfire (as instructed I have used these – within this thesis and also during presentations connected with this work). Another interviewee gave me photos – duplicates that she had of the charred and regenerating landscape. Photos, their absence and presence, will be revisited in Chapter Eight.

Some of the participants offered me gifts: a hand knitted beanie and scarf from Irena who was recruited through the local CWA branch; a plate of home-made pikelets (presented to me the day after our interview) that I shared with my home-stay hosts and *Stitch & Chat* attendees; a recipe; plant cuttings from a rehabilitated garden. A few of the displaced participants showed me some or all of the special items that they had fled with on the day of the disaster. During three interviews I was shown the distorted objects that were salvaged after patient sifting through the

rubble and ash. Kristina showed me the items she rescued from her smouldering home; they were displayed on a shelf that was built for that specific purpose in her family's new home. These were tangible reminders of their past, before the fires destroyed their home, garden and possessions. Those distorted objects also represented how extreme and destructive the fires were and the fragility of human life.

Julia, who was alone at home for some of the time during the disaster, showed me a large quilt called *Resilience*, which she had created in response to Black Saturday. Each panel of the quilt represented something about the fire or healing after the disaster. Sewn together the panels formed a whole, a quilted narrative of resilience. This prominent theme of craft/crafting (mostly, but not always, stemming from the *Stitch & Chat*/CWA groups) within the primary material intersects with analogies used by narrative inquirers to describe how they analyse personal stories. Fraser (2004, p. 183) draws on multiple metaphors:

Piecing together fragments of the fabric of conversations, researchers may be understood to sew ideas together. Similarly, we may be seen as knitters who 'spin a yarn' by weaving together the threads of different stories. Finally, we may be compared to travellers who embark on a journey and who try to use maps and compasses.

Fraser's words (2004) indicate the scope for creativity within narrative inquiry. Creativity, for some of the participants, was an important facet of their (transformed) post-bushfire lives. A do-able (enjoyable) task or project can provide an anchor or a purpose when circumstances overwhelm. I was sensitive to the fact that the people I had lived with and met during my fieldwork had gifted me so much (intangible and tangible) and in return I had nothing to offer them. Ironically, after returning from 12 months unpaid maternity leave I found myself completely at sea with the task of immersion and analysis. The pile of transcripts was daunting (Image 3). I couldn't quilt or knit but turned my attention to writing a journal paper. This was a task (my anchor) that was do-able and had a visible end-point with a tangible outcome (Proudley, 2013). Once the paper had been published, I posted/mailed copies to my fieldwork hosts and a few of the participants that I had maintained contact with. It was a way of reminding them, and myself, that the research had resumed and would continue. It also conveyed that I valued their feedback and was willing to address any critical or constructive feedback.²⁹ It felt, with my long absence from the work, that I had acquired a heightened awareness of the temporal component: the longer it was taking me to complete the thesis, the more concerned I became about the (temporal/spatial) distance between my body being in the field (Latrobe Valley) and

²⁹ I received detailed feedback from one participant, which was useful and appreciated.

my present situation of being a part-time, narrative inquirer in profoundly different personal circumstances from when I had commenced.

Understanding the meaning of knowing

The writing of this thesis, as stated previously, did not follow the chronological format signified by the Table of Contents. The chapters were written in fits and starts over a number of years. Writing, according to Sandelowski (1998, p. 376), “is a mode of discovery that takes the researchers where they should be by the time they get to the write-up: ‘beyond’ their data”. That ‘mode of discovery’ can equate to a painful wrestle with words. To produce, what van Manen (2006b, p. 131-132) refers to as *depthful writing*, it is necessary for the task:

...to be approached again and again, now here and then there, going back and forth between the parts and the whole in order to arrive at a finely crafted piece that often reflects the personal ‘signature’ of the author.

The ‘back and forth’ motion that van Manen (2006a) refers to mimics the hermeneutic interpretive practices, when the inquirer moves “from the whole to the part and back to the whole” (Crotty, 1998, p. 14). Making sense of human experience requires a hermeneutic method which “does not offer a procedural system; rather its method requires an ability to be reflective, insightful, sensitive to language, and constantly open to experience” (van Manen, 1997, p. xi). Narrative inquiry accommodates creativity and the researcher, ideally, learns and grows through “our suffering with writing” (Charmaz, 1999, p. 379). Essentially, the complexities and ambiguities that saturate the primary material, which forms the backbone of this work, cannot be neatly categorised or resolved. Narrative inquiry allows the researcher to wallow in the rich stories and get lost, seduced or side-tracked by the many pathways that could alter the findings of the study. Lindsay and Schwind (2016, p. 16) note that the “revelations and the learning possibilities are vast” owing to narrative inquiry being a qualitative research approach (Chapter Three). Whilst the written document (this thesis):

...appears to stand still; the narrative appears finished...anyone who has written a narrative knows that it, like life, is a continual unfolding where the narrative insights of today are the chronological events of tomorrow. Such writers know in advance that the task of conveying a sense that the narrative is unfinished and the stories will be retold and lives relived in new ways is likely to be completed in less than satisfactory ways (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 9).

What has been included in, and just as importantly what has been omitted from this thesis was my decision, not the participants. Josselson (2007, p. 549) states that “from the researcher’s point of view, the report is not ‘about’ the participants but ‘about’ the researcher’s meaning making” and that the “researchers are interested in the research questions (and their careers)” whilst the

“participants are interested in themselves”. Time, specifically the years that have elapsed between completing my fieldwork in the Latrobe Valley and preparing to submit this thesis, plays a role in how the researcher (I) and, potentially, the researched, feel about the final work:

Because of the time it takes to do a narrative study and publish it, those participants who do read what we write do so at a point in their lives different from the moment represented by the text we have analyzed. They may recognize some aspect of themselves in what we say but will be aware that although we have ‘got’ something right about them, we also got them wrong. Most people will not be very bothered by this or not for very long (Josselson, 2007, p 560).

Josselson’s words are bittersweet and address my concerns about time and how much (or little) of it I was able to dedicate to *understanding the meaning of knowing*. This thesis hinges on how I applied Bourdieu’s ‘thinking tools’ to help me make sense of the participants’ post-bushfire sense-making (Chapter Three). The inquirer concludes the inquiry still in the “midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people’s lives, both individual and social” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). I needed to engage with the phases of the study that I had completed in the past (fieldwork, coding and core themes) through the lens of the (theoretical) present. Throughout this chapter, I have considered the ‘researcher’ (myself) and the ‘researched’ (the participants), yet it is the ‘reader/s’ who are the “ultimate interpreters, perhaps reading a narrative differently than either teller or investigator” (Riessman, 2001, p.5).

Author’s representation of the analytic & interpretative process

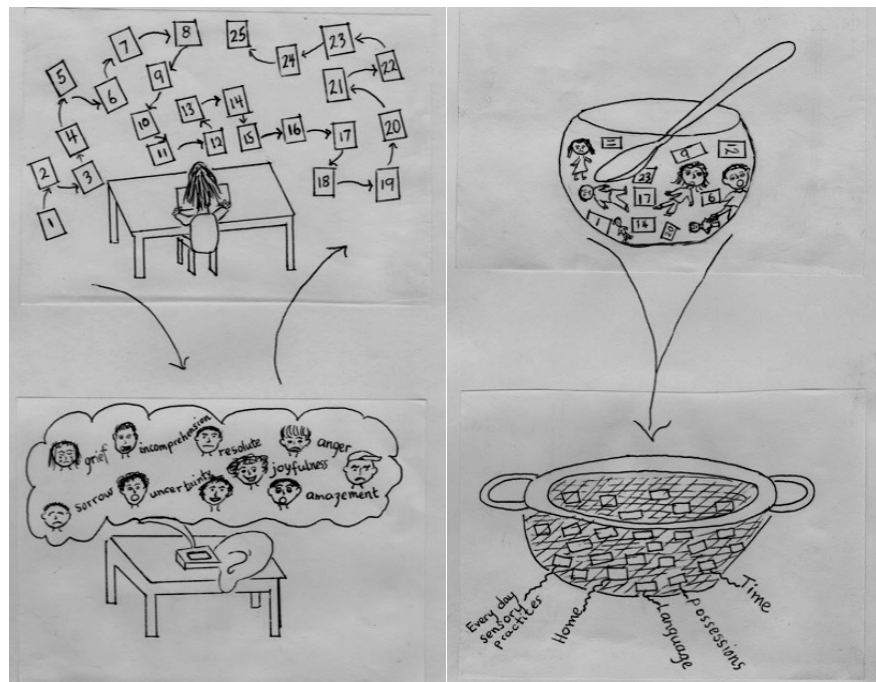


Image 5a: Immersion in transcript

Image 5c: Isolating the themes

Image 5b: Deep listening

Conclusion

I have endeavoured, over the course of this chapter, to report how I conducted my post-disaster research with displaced and non-displaced people from Central Gippsland. I have provided the rationale behind applying my choice of methods. It was established earlier, in Chapter Two that possessions, for many people, can be tightly tied to identity and can also play a part in connecting individuals to a specific place and time. A significant number of the interviewees spoke of unsettledness and/or disorientation, due, in part, to the destruction of some or all of their possessions.

The first section of this chapter engaged with the processes that underpin this narrative inquiry. These included: conducting scoping interviews; determining my geographic focus; making connections and completing my fieldwork in the Latrobe Valley. I clarified how I recruited participants and why I chose to conduct in-depth, open-ended, interviews with fire-affected residents.

The second section of this chapter was preoccupied with the time-intensive task of analysis and interpretation of the primary material. It is through the act of writing that a researcher crystallises what she has recorded and observed during the fieldwork. An important element of this inquiry was ethical considerations and the researcher's duty of care to the participants. The primary aim of the second part of this chapter was to *evoke something of the research experience*, moving beyond the words that are put on paper during the transcribing of the interviews. Woven through this chapter was a reflexive look at how I came to form "an account of the accounts" (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 15).

Undertaking the Gippsland fieldwork, in conjunction with the quantity of time I was immersed in the spoken/written words of the participants, reinforced the *vital role of continuity in our everyday sensory lives* and the stability offered by familiar, embodied, routines that unfold in linear, human 'clock' time. It is worth noting that the time-intensive process of analysis was completed in the comfort of my own home, a place where I have lived the longest consecutively and where I am surrounded by familiar objects. Some of those items connect me to key people or places in my present and my past; the histories, and the associated (sensorial) memories, punctuate my daily routines.

The narrative analysis revealed the entangled emotions, negative and positive responses, of distress, anger, guilt, confusion, resentment, joy and personal growth that can ensue after a bushfire crisis. The obliteration of meaningful, or generic, possessions and the rupturing of what

Bourdieu (1990) describes as *the feel for the game* deserve more consideration in these, climatically, disconcerting times. There has been an emphasis in this chapter on the significance of the aural. Narrative inquiry recognises subtleties, drawn not only from what is said but *how* it is said. In Chapters Five, Six and Seven, that follow, I have attempted to free the Gippsland narratives from my own “predispositions, mechanisms, discourses and points of view” (Schirato and Webb, 2002, p. 262) so that the reader can engage with the primary material that lies at the heart of this work.

Chapter Five

“All their treasures”

Introduction

The emotional attachment that people have to ‘place’ – their homes, animals and possessions – was the most powerful theme to emerge from the Gippsland narratives. The story at the heart of this chapter is loss. For those rendered homeless it begins with the confronting experience of returning to nothing. I contemplate the items that were salvaged days, weeks or months afterwards (sifting through the ash) and items that continued to be missed or yearned for years later. For some people identity is tied to possessions, so how did people respond to the destruction of objects that helped define them?



Image 6: This photograph was taken from a vehicle by an interviewee as she was evacuating her home.

After focusing on the absence of meaningful objects, there is consideration of the trauma of owners whose livestock (living possessions) perished in the fires. It is important to recognise the intangible losses, the comfort and familiarity of home and the feelings and sensations that cannot be labelled or articulated. Ultimately, what the displaced faced was uncertainty and loss of control, because the stability of 'place' had been permanently ruptured.

Towards the end of the chapter some of the emotional challenges of displacement are explored and the following questions addressed. Is the actual meaning of 'home' lost? In retrospect and from the perspective of being 'homeless,' what did 'home' mean? The chapter finishes with the insights of those who lost possessions and whether that has changed their attitude and approach to objects and the accumulation of 'stuff'.

Returning to nothing

Of the 33 participants interviewed, 17 were rendered homeless. Of the 17 who lost their home, some were aware in advance of what they would find (complete destruction). Nearly all of the homeless participants stated that they had a strong need to see their destroyed home in order to believe and begin to understand and accept that their home was gone. Interviewees spoke of returning to smouldering or charcoal ruins.

Most people who were either absent or evacuated were faced with up to five days delay before they were permitted to return to the site where their home used to be. Interviewees described the circumstances of how they learned about the loss of their home and several were given incorrect information or multiple conflicting reports.

My friend rang, and she goes, 'Your house is burning', and I screamed to her, I said, 'Shut up don't tell me. I know'. So yeah, that was my scream for the house. (Kristina)

Her family had a four-day wait before they could see what was left:

They should have organised tour trips with people, because my husband, when he drove in the car up, there were three of us and we were going to go together with the neighbours because we thought then we can help each other, because they said [at a meeting in town] that 'it's a big shock', so we went in a convoy, but then you start to argue from all the stress...and you come and you can't believe what you see. Like half the world is normal and then you drive into these areas and all of a sudden, it was nothing. It was scary. It was grey-white, grey, there was nothing. It was like a lottery...and then my husband went very quiet and he was grey...he was in so much physical pain. (Kristina)

One of the younger interviewees Hanna, described the time in between becoming aware of the fire and being permitted to return to their blackened land as 'the worst really'. The fire occurred

on Saturday and it wasn't until Wednesday – which felt much longer – that her family were allowed to witness the ruins.

Disbelief is infused through the narratives of some of the interviewees whose homes were destroyed. Interspersed throughout Cass's narrative is a sequence of eight words: 'I didn't expect the house to be gone. I didn't expect the house to be gone'. She was told by a neighbour that the house, which the family had built, was gone, but crying, she kept saying to herself, 'I know it will be there'. She described returning to nothing. 'We just cried and Mum and Dad cried as well. We all just stood there in shock and horror'.

Pete, who witnessed his house burning, said he thought on the day, 'I won't take much because I'll be back tomorrow, but when you come back there's nothing here'.

A woman in her fifties, who was absent on Black Saturday, avoided the trauma of the bushfire but confronted total loss:

It was maybe just a shock because we had left the house that morning and came back to nothing. So you sort of think, in retrospect, 'I would have thrown a few things in the car', but you're not to know. And every year until that year, every summer, I had always thrown the photo albums in the boot of the car, but I didn't do it that year. I thought, 'I do it every year and pull them out again'.
(Kate)

Kate and her husband were able to get out to their property the following day. They had been at a roadblock:

Heaps of people were standing around wondering what had happened, whether the house was okay. A young guy who had stayed out, (he and his family had stayed out and defended their house), he had come to the roadblock to pick up something...and he saw us and said, 'Do you want to go in?'

Initially they hesitated – 'we could still see smoke' – but were reassured that it was 'quite safe'. Knowing in advance their home was gone 'sort of helped'.

We walked over to where our house had been and we thought 'it was cold', and I thought, 'That soon?' I would have imagined it would be hot like the bark in the garden was still smouldering.

Another couple, Jude and her husband, were led to believe their house was intact but shortly afterwards they were told it was no longer there. Jude asked a husband of a friend, who was a volunteer fire fighter, to go up to their property and take some photos:

Because we had no idea when we were able to go back, because it was a crime site. That made us angry. So many people got in, in various ways and you were just, you know, we're the hopeless ones. Everyone else seemed to be able to get in, I said, 'I just need something. Can you take some photos and send them to me, email them to me?' And that was really strange; it was this thing of, 'Yes, yes, that's definitely my place. I can tell', and it really helped me.

After attending a meeting on the Tuesday evening they were told they could go out to their property. Her husband went to work on the Wednesday and she ‘returned to nothing’, a haunting, solitary experience:

And so it’s just me by myself, I parked at the end of the court and walked very slowly up the drive and walked around, and was very, just numb and then I just drove up the Traralgon South Road, and just couldn’t believe it. You know, you just didn’t know where you were.

So that was quite amazing being there by myself, but yeah, just sort of unemotional, just quite numb. (Jude)

The youngest participant described her family’s experience of ‘returning to nothing’:

Everything was just black and white and grey, and it’s like you would expect the moon to be, you know, people talk about moonscapes, and that’s what it was. So it was really just unfamiliar and your eyes were just so wide opened, and just not being able to really comprehend it. (Elyse)

To achieve their dream of rural living, Harley and Lorna had moved out to ten acres in Callignee nine years prior to Black Saturday. They were informed of their loss by a neighbour who rang them ‘that night about eight o’clock and said that it was gone. It was gone about six o’clock she said’. (Harley)

Lorna recalled going to bed in her daughter and son-in-law’s bed and saying to her husband, ‘I think my words were, and it still upsets me, ‘Here I am, 65 and bloody homeless’

Another couple, of a similar age, talked about the stress related to ‘not knowing what was left’. Leon, who ‘didn’t think the house would burn’, said:

We didn’t know whether we had lost the shed; well we didn’t even know the house had gone until there was a meeting at the Red Cross somewhere in Traralgon, and our next door neighbour, said, ‘Your house is gone, but your sheds are still there’.

Irena, his wife, said she ‘didn’t know what to expect, but when I saw it, it was gone’. She was one of the few participants who observed the destruction and accepted it almost immediately.

This theme of returning to nothing, has drawn heavily on the narratives of those who were rendered homeless, the interviewees, who literally ‘returned to nothing’. Those participants who were able to return and live in the charred landscape also shared vivid descriptions of returning to an altered landscape. One woman, whose home was defended by her husband, brother-in-law and sister, on Black Saturday, was not convinced it was intact as ‘we weren’t allowed back for five days’ and ‘until I see it, I won’t know’. She described what confronted her:

It was like a hellhole everything was so black and horrible, and there was no moisture in the air, so there wasn’t a bird, there wasn’t a butterfly, there wasn’t a fly. There wasn’t anything...and there was no moisture in the air, to go outside your eyes hurt, you had a headache...so horrible things. It was like the end of the earth. (Carmen)

In many instances destruction surrounded the homes that remained intact. Karen, whose home remained unscathed, remarked on the complete lack of anything familiar:

We didn't actually recognise the place driving up. When we first pulled up, it was just heart wrenching, it really was. I couldn't believe what it looked like and I lived there.

Reuben, a father of three young children, had been told the day following the bushfire, a Sunday, that their house was still standing which was reassuring but he said:

Until you actually got in it, you didn't understand. When you came here and just saw that all the ground at the back of the house was just white ash, it was just, it must have been really hot, like snow almost, like in the log fire at the end of the night.

In the wake of Black Saturday, the Gippsland interviewees, for the first time, responded to witnessing, the indelible experience of what was left behind: the disfiguration of the built and natural landscape.

Objects salvaged



Image 7: This ornament was salvaged from the ruins of a home in the Latrobe Valley

Image 8: A participant in this study, a musician, salvaged her flute from the wreckage

After the bushfire some of the participants, whose homes were destroyed, managed to salvage items, plucked from the ashes, either intact or distorted from extreme heat.

One family had to wait three-and-a-half months before their block was cleared of debris ‘so we had plenty of time to come out and just sift through’.

The thing I kept thinking was, and even now sometimes I think, ‘How could **that** have burned?’ and ‘How could **that** have burned?’ Yeah, some things you think would survive a fire hadn’t, but we picked up little bits and pieces like mainly ceramic things that had already been pre-fired, so we’ve got that still. (Kate)

Kate was the only interviewee to detail the labour-intensive process involved in seeking out objects:

Our sons-in-law came down with sieves so we worked out where the ensuite was because I was looking for my grandfather’s wedding present to my grandmother. It was a ruby and pearl necklace. And so we found where the ensuite was and worked out roughly where the wardrobe was, so we sieved and sieved but there was, you would come across these clumps of silver or melted glass or something and you would try and work out what was in it. But anyway in the end I went to a jeweller and I said, ‘If rubies or pearls went through a fire, would they survive?’ He said, ‘No, they would be the first to go, they’re soft’.

So I thought, ‘Well I’ll stop looking’. But it was good being able to do that because if you roughly worked out where a room was you could look for something that you could think of, and basically we didn’t find anything in our daughter’s room. I actually had all her study things she had done for a course and that, and you could just see piles of white ash and that was where books had been, and maybe your arch files with the wings and the spines.

Two women spoke about the prospect of incorporating the surviving or distorted objects into art. Kristina installed a built-in shelf in her new home that was dedicated to displaying ‘all the things that came out of the fire. I wanted something from the house’. She collected ‘boxes and boxes’ of coloured glass with the aim of making an artwork, but the ash irritated her skin and just prior to the interview she disposed of them at the tip.

Deep into Jude’s narrative was reference to ‘a lot of broken crockery’ in a box that is stored inside her mother’s shed. She had thought, ‘it was a good idea to do some artwork with the pieces but I really don’t need too many reminders’. The box remains in storage: ‘I might just take it to the tip one day’. Earlier in Jude’s narrative, when the word ‘remind’ is first used, she spoke about a friend she likes to visit. Her friend’s home survived Black Saturday but one thing in particular is disturbing to Jude:

They’ve got a photo on the wall of their garden after the fires and from a distance it looks beautiful, it looks like an autumn scene, but I know it’s not and I just hate that photo, and I think, ‘I don’t know how you can look at that every day’, and then in another room, there’s a photo of them at about three o’clock in the morning when they look absolutely terrible after fighting the fires, and I think, ‘Why do you’, and it’s framed, and I think, ‘Why do you have that photo? Why do you need to be reminded?’

Jude’s puzzled response reinforces the idea that a photo or an object distorted by fire can be interpreted in various ways. Abandoning her original idea of using the broken crockery for art

mirrors Jude's negative reaction to the photographs that her friend had on display is understandable. While her friend might feel that the image represents some form of victory over the fire, Jude prefers to leave the images behind.

How people have experienced loss, the nature of the loss and their personal history and temperament can influence their reactions to items that have been salvaged from the ashes. It can also influence their response to images of an event that resulted in such profound loss.

Yearning for absent objects

When the interviews were conducted, several participants spoke about their yearning for specific items that were meaningful and invested with particular feeling. Objects that are associated with special memories, places or people, and those links to the past that evoke emotion, were sorely missed by many of the interviewees.

Jude, who flinched at the photo of her fire-fighting friend, spoke about what she missed:

We had just so many books, and when people ask what I miss most it's books and my art, paintings and pottery and things. They're the things that can't be replaced, and you don't have the money to go out and buy something now to fill a space on the wall.

She went on to say:

I cannot believe (that) I had this beautiful Japanese woodblock Triptych, and I didn't see it. I went to the bedroom door and I walked out, and I could have easily have picked that up. I had a beautiful weaving from Laos, that I used to wake up every morning and look at it, and it was just a gorgeous piece of fabric. I could have got lots of artwork off the walls.

Jude described how her husband delayed revealing the true depth of his loss:

It wasn't until six weeks later that he finally told me that, opposite our bedroom there was a little bedroom, a single bedroom which was a study, but he had all his clothes in there, and when his mother died, before his mother died actually, when she moved out of her home there were all these things of his in this room, and I could not get him to sort them out, and so he was there trying to find photos and all the things from Poland, and so he lost the lot and he felt very, very guilty about that. He also lost his mother's ashes, which a few people I've heard of, their deceased's ashes went up in the fire.

One couple, Irena and Leon, had very little time to grab anything: she left with only the clothes she was wearing. Irena mentioned her engagement and eternity rings, photographs and all the cards she received when their four babies were born. They both spoke about the pain of losing their deceased son's woodwork from high school. Irena described him as 'the son I lost', (at age 15) and how losing that one object, a wooden box that he had made, 'would be the most sad thing that I have lost and also the tape when he was little', which captured his speech as a toddler. Other items associated with him, such as his schoolwork and the cards he had given his

parents, are also missed. The mementoes of his life – which triggered happy memories – were gone: ‘you know, things like that, that are not replaceable’. (Irena)

After being quite thorough over several hours of packing the car on Black Saturday, Lisa described that later she only became aware of the loss of objects that were unique.

Lisa: Both our families had left us with all the family heirlooms; well we had tucked them away, and put them away. They’re gone. Like we had journals from my husband’s grandfather and his great grandfather and because they were sitting in the bottom of a cupboard somewhere, we had put them away for later, never even thought to grab them. It’s just all that little stuff.

M: All that history.

Lisa: Yeah, that’s gone forever, but you just don’t think to grab that stuff, and a lot of people said the same thing.

Kristina, who rebuilt in the same location, said:

I want everything back. I would swap everything just to have the things back that we lost. My father was a composer, musician and draftsman. He was very, very creative, and I lost all his poems and all his music, everything. And that feeling inside is awful because I can’t play it.

We had a very cosy house before, and I still miss the couch, and I said that to my husband last week.

Regarding sentimental and valuable items that were destroyed in the bushfire, Cass said that some of the most painful losses are the gifts that her best friend had given her, (who died in the year following the disaster). The memories of that valued friendship were connected to possessions that were reduced to ash. The pain of the loss caused by Black Saturday was compounded by the loss of her friend:

Just how cruel can life be? Just everything obliterated. We did pottery and my kiln, you couldn’t even recognise my kiln. I had antiques I had crystal. We had special friends from Scotland and whenever they came over – he was the chief engineer of the whisky distilleries – he would always bring two whiskies over, one for drinking for when they started drinking and one antique whisky, so that was always put down, you know. So lost all those, lost all my special crystals, and now I’ve lost my girlfriend and the things that she had bought me, they’re all gone as well.

Not every participant yearned for destroyed items. Colin mentioned the inconvenience of having to constantly replace things and was quite blunt about the comprehensive nature of his family’s loss:

We lost 35 years worth of stuff. Some of it was important, most of it wasn’t. When you look and you go, ‘Shit, we lost all of this and that, we can replace it, it’s stuff’. Every now and then you go, ‘I’ll just go and get, no I won’t, because it’s gone’. Like fishing gear and all your tools, and my wife will look for some magazines or books, and ‘No, they’re all gone’.

Animals

Animals featured heavily in the interviews conducted with farming families and hobby farmers. For some of these participants the loss of livestock (cows, sheep and goats) was the most emotional element of their Black Saturday experience.

Pete, in his sixties at the time of our interview, found it very painful to bury all of his goats. He and his wife had been breeding them for almost twenty years on their 16 acres in Callignee. Their entire goatherd had perished from asphyxiation:

Yeah. I cried. Every one. I had to bury 86 [pause] and I cried every time I picked one up. Oh Boy.

And I found them, and I had to bury them, and boy, that was hard. That was hard.

Somebody said, 'Are you going to get some goats back again?' I said, 'No bloody way'.

The youngest male farmer, Adam, had spent the ten years prior to Black Saturday building up a herd of cows. He had started out with four cows and gradually increased the herd to eighty. Adam's entire herd perished:

Adam: And that was devastating, well it still is.

M: Did they all have names?

Adam: Yeah, every one of them, and you knew them by sight. Every day you would drive around them and stuff, and that was really, really hard. You know, you had the old cow that you, she would come up to you in the paddock and you could scratch her behind the ears and all that kind of thing, and so you had a very big attachment to it, and if you had a bad day at work, you would just go down and sit in the paddock and watch them every day. And for me, that's been the hardest thing. I won't name the next lot.

Another part-time farmer, Malcolm, had spent five years building up a herd of cattle:

Yeah, we didn't have many left by the time it was finished. It was very unfortunate because they actually were out in the open, they weren't in the bush, and they only had an electric fence between them and the bush, and of course the noise of the fire, I believe, was pretty horrific and they've taken off into the bush and that's where they've got caught up. If they had stayed out in the open probably a lot more of them would have survived, but yeah, that hurt. The fact that we couldn't get back for four days after the fires – I was beside myself because every day – we would come out and try and get past the police and we couldn't get past them.

I was worried about the animals. I knew the place had been burnt but we didn't know if our house was there at that time, and we just couldn't get through. It was four days later and we finished up coming around some back roads and got in, and I think we put two down that were still alive that were damaged. So those poor animals suffered for four days and that's what I was concerned about more than anything else, you know.

There was a particularly interesting exchange between Malcolm and his wife regarding returning to their property after the bushfire:

Sandra: You had it worse because I didn't come back the first time when he came in. I said, "No", because there's going to be dead animals and I don't need that visual so I'm not going, but it was worse for him because they were like children to him, his animals, but he had to have that visual, but I couldn't do anything about it.

Malcolm: But being stud animals they all had names and yeah, and probably half of them, I can walk up into the paddock anywhere and give them a pat and all that sort of stuff and they used to look forward to it. So yeah, that was a bit of a, for me, that was probably one of the hardest parts.

Sandra: That would be horrible for you. I know it would be, but I didn't want to go with you.

A long-term resident, not a farmer, on a larger block of land recalled that his son-in-law snuck in the back way and had to shoot 'all the animals that were suffering. There were eleven sheep and four poddies [orphan calves], and there were four in calf, so he had to shoot them all'. (Erik)

Distinguishing the relationship he had between his goats and his cows, one hobby farmer, Harley said, 'I allowed myself to get close to my goats'. He was building up a herd and would come home after work and see his goats:

As I would drive down the road to come to the driveway, all my goats would lift their heads as I drove up the driveway and pull up and by the time I got out of the car they were all up at the gate and I would have to go over and give all of them a pat and a bit of a chat to them all. I mean they're a beautiful animal, goats.

Harley considered his goats as pets, so the fact that he was 'never ever going to eat one of them' allowed him to be emotionally attached to them.

What Harley found most painful was returning to their scorched property to 'do stuff up until the point in time we sold it', and it would only take half an hour before 'I would start to feel very melancholy because of the loss of the animals, and particularly the goats'. Seeing the mounds of earth out in the paddock where the Council workers had buried their animals made Harley teary and he felt unable to stay at the property for any length of time:

I found it difficult to be out there, mainly because of imagining how those poor bloody goats would have died. I mean it would have been the most horrific way, and I still feel bad that I didn't leave the gate open or something. It might not have made any difference but, and to be honest they tell you not to do that, because people trying to escape don't want animals in front of them on the road if they're trying to get out.

There were fewer and less detailed references to domestic pets. Domestic pets were usually taken to safety when their owners fled the fire; they were a high priority during the evacuation. Two interviewees mentioned their cats. Pete, who had to bury his 86 goats, was talking about objects he had saved and suddenly said:

Pete: And the cat came back after three months.

M: That's a nice story.

Pete: It is. Yeah.

M: What's the cat's name?

Pete: Mary. Wherever she is. Did you see her?

M: No, I didn't. What kind of cat is she?

Pete: Just a black and white thing. She had a brother, but he must have died in the fire.

M: Did she come back to the property or someone found her, or...

Pete: No, no, she came back to the property. I was here one night and she just came down the hill.

M: Just strolled in, that would have been a nice night to have her return.'

Pete: It was. That was my moment. [very emotional]

M: That's nice.

Pete: Yeah. I'm not a great cat fan, but that was good. Pardon me for shedding a tear.

One family tried to evacuate with their cat but it escaped and they didn't have time to pursue it:

So we of course thought he had perished. When we came back on the Wednesday – nothing – wasn't anywhere to be found, his house was destroyed and he was nowhere to be seen.

Her daughter found it:

All his whiskers, all his eyebrows and everything were all shrivelled up, all his paws were burnt and blistered, but apart from that, he was alive, and he'd been eating rats. He was in the vet's for ten days. I thought this free moggie was going to cost me thousands; not one cent did they charge me because he was a fire victim.

It was amazing and my girlfriend whose house exploded around them and nearly passed away, their cat turned up five months later, and it was found over in Koornalla, which is kilometres and kilometres away. And it was because she had a microchip in her neck that they took it into the vet and they found it five months later. (Karen)

Animals, in the main, were the most painful loss for the participants. Not one of the interviewees had experienced the loss of human life in their immediate circle of family or friends. The loss of animals was the most emotional theme across the Gippsland narratives.

Loss and identity

One displaced interviewee (who was living in a shed at the time of the interview) said she was not too deeply affected by the loss of objects, but she could appreciate how comprehensive loss such as she had experienced, might affect other people:

Sometimes it's not necessarily, it's not the possessions, it's the things that they do with them, their hobbies, and what their life is about. (Robyn)

Practical items can play a major role in everyday life.

Two male interviewees of a similar age, referred to their tools and how strongly they associated them with their identity. Alan could not conceive of life without those specific items:

I mean I feel very sorry for people who lost everything. I don't know how I would have coped had that happened, because all of my tools and fishing gear and hunting gear and all that, if I had lost all that, you know, it really would have been devastating. It's been a lot harder on a lot more people than it has been for us because we didn't lose all that sort of thing.

His decision to actively defend his home, with the support of his wife, was largely based on not being able to walk away from his tools; objects that were so heavily enmeshed in his identity.

Graham also described the strong connection between items that were destroyed in the fire and his perception of himself:

I lost a shed up there and it was full of junk, as I said before, it had my father's stuff, it had some of my wife's father's stuff, a lot of the stuff that we had collected, because when we came up here it was just an empty paddock, and I'm convinced reasonably well, that, that shed was my identity, that shed said who I was. Yeah, it was a mess, it was a junk shed.

But it was me, and it was not only me, it was my origins as well, and that's what went, and it was a case of trying to come to grips with sort of, I've gone. I'm still here, but I've gone.

Gordon, whose fencing was destroyed, emphasised how important it was to recognise sheds and what they can represent:

The other thing too, the general community, I don't think appreciate the loss of the sheds. You know, a lot of people say, 'Oh, it's just a shed, what are they worried about', but inside that shed was the tractor or the tools or the where-with-all or their livelihood, which enabled them to do what they needed to do. So that was sort of understated I think when, 'Oh, you only lost a shed, what are you complaining about?' But in fact, it wasn't just the four walls.

Whilst he had no direct experience of losing a shed and its contents he could understand the profound repercussions such a loss might have on a person's sense of self.

For some of the older male interviewees, items that were destroyed were strongly tied to their future plans. Leon reminisced about the orchard he had planted when they moved to their 10 acres in Callignee: 'I had a beautiful little cherry orchard. It was going to be my ambition when I retired'. Harvesting and selling the cherries was 'going to be my long term retirement program'.

Erik, who fled the fire, missed certain items that were going to feature heavily in his future:

I had all sorts of projects ahead of me, in retirement; wind generation and solar energy and what have you. They were irreplaceable items and it was sad.

Similarly, Harley said he was gearing up to retire:

I was getting all these wonderful woodworking machines in so that I would have something to do when retired. We had had a couple of cypress trees cut down and we had all this beautiful cypress that had been drying out for six or seven years, which I was going to turn into beautiful furniture.

Black Saturday altered the life course of many interviewees. The loss of home and meaningful objects meant retirement plans (particularly for some men) would be either postponed or unfulfilled.

Life cycle

Our relationship to home and possessions changes as we move through the life cycle. Some of the participants had raised their children in the home that either survived or was destroyed on Black Saturday, whilst others had moved to the region after raising their children elsewhere. Several participants had children (infants or primary school age and older teenagers or young adults) living at home. Attachment to place can potentially grow over time, and the longer a person has lived in a place the more years they have had to acquire objects (and feelings) that they associate with home. Where you are in the life cycle – whether it is your childhood home or the home you have built for your family – can shape the emotional toll of profound loss. The time it takes to re-establish a home might not be as important a factor for young or middle aged adults as it could be for someone who is older or elderly.

A young woman who had moved to Callignee with her husband and infant daughter not long before the crisis, noted the difference between herself and her neighbours, a couple who were in their seventies:

I didn't really have heaps of antique furniture or anything like that. We had only been married three months after [our first baby] was born, so just before we moved here. So we hadn't had much together stuff. (Hanna)

As they had lived in the region briefly – not long enough to establish a strong connection to the landscape – there was less pain at the destruction of their home, but they still had to endure the stress and inconvenience of rebuilding.

But I think if we were older and we didn't have the kids, we probably would have done something, or if we had been here longer it probably would have changed something too, yeah I don't know, but I think we just started and I don't know, we're both pretty open to change anyway. (Hanna)

One couple, Malcolm and Sandra, expressed their surprise at the impact the bushfire had on their adult children, particularly one of their daughters who had moved out of the region over ten years prior to Black Saturday. The house she had grown up in (not their home at the time of the fire) was destroyed:

When she went up and saw our old house was gone she was devastated. That's where she grew up. She was just totally devastated and it didn't even belong to us, but she was just 'My God, it's gone'. (Sandra)

Fire-affected young adults – either living at home or living independently or a mixture of both – suffer the loss of their childhood memories; all evidence of their history is erased. Julia reinforced the need to recognise the loss experienced by older children who no longer live permanently in their parent's home:

Young women or men who are university students who were moving away from home at that time or living away from home, they've got no home to come back to and their childhood's been wiped out, like all their eighteenth birthday gifts and their twenty-first gifts, and all that. They can't move back in with Mum and Dad because they're living in a shed, so where do they go? There's been a lot of that, where they've had to set up homes separate from Mum and Dad sooner than what they would have thought because when you're a uni student, you know, you go away to uni and then you're home for the holidays but there's no home, there's no room, and they've been very displaced.

The youngest participant – who moved with her family to the Latrobe Valley at the age of 18 months, had direct experience of this scenario. Prior to Black Saturday Elyse had been living in Callignee with her parents and working in Melbourne one day a week. The family's home was destroyed:

The hardest thing for me is that I don't have a home. So you know, at the time, my home was up in Callignee on our block of land, and because there's no room for me there, and everything, like we're building and there will be room for me in the house, and I love the house that we're building, and I love what Mum and Dad are doing with the landscape and stuff. But, because I'm not there to do a lot of it, and I physically can't do a lot of it, and apart from the fact that I'm not up there, it's not what I know as my land anymore, as my home. And, here with [her brother], this is [his] house, it's not my house, I can't do whatever I want with it.

Elyse described her situation of prolonged displacement, as a form of frustrating limbo.

Paul acknowledged the losses of his teenage daughters but believes that the intensity was diluted as they had belongings and meaningful items safely stored at their mother's house outside of the fire-affected region, where they spent half their time.

Frequently parents of adult children – who had permanently established their lives elsewhere – thought about items, retrospectively, that they had no time to save as they fled the oncoming fire. Often they were items that had been stored away for years or decades with other mementoes and documents from childhood:

But my son's photos and that from when he was, you know, photos he had taken when he was younger, um all those are gone. He had a full collection of *The Phantom* comics, which was worth an absolute fortune, to be honest with you. I never thought of catching them. Never thought of it. Yeah, just little things like that, you know. (Pete)

Earlier in Pete's narrative he had referred to his two adult children who had spent much of their childhood in Callignee living in the house he had built for his family:

Pete: They're really saddened that it was burnt, they really were, all their treasures. Because one was in Queensland and one was in Albany [Western Australia].

M: All their memories.

Pete: Yeah, everything gone.

Kate referred to the eleven 44 gallon drums of possessions, that her daughter and son-in-law had stored on their property, whilst they lived overseas: 'so we opened the seal and it was just ash'. Weeks later rummaging through all the ashes in one of them [her son-in-law] came across their 'birth certificates singed around the outside' and 'two \$50 notes' in a Christmas card from 2003 wedged in the middle of a concertina file.

Often loss was viewed as that suffered by the people who lived in the house when the fire occurred. Children or other immediate relatives of the fire-affected, who spent their formative years in that environment, also felt deep loss and yet they were less visible because their home was elsewhere.

Intangible losses

The intangible losses that are difficult to define and sometimes unconscious, things such as the comfort and familiarity of home, the sensations, the smells and the associated sounds, often caused ongoing uneasiness. The absence of a feeling was unsettling for several of the displaced participants. Paul expressed his frustration at what he had lost forever and stated that the bushfire:

Totally changed everything about our place, not just the inside, not just the house, not just our stuff, but all our history. Basically it just wiped us, for the last 14 years, off the planet.

Yeah it just totally took everything. Not just the stuff inside, but all the kids play things, everything they played with all the time. The view, the way I felt about the place, the pergola. The gazebo I had built out there that was just a place we spent all our time; winter or summer, we would just spend all our time out in there. So all these things that are about the growing up, that just were totally removed from our lives.

The rawness of that absence – of personal history, memories of his children in that environment – was powerful. What was missing in his life, well over two years after the event, was painful to live with on a daily basis, and the pain was compounded by the amount of time he spent in the new house due to his role as primary carer to his infant son. At the time of the interview Paul was wrestling with the totality and the permanence of the loss, which hadn't eased with the passing of time:

I think that's the point I'm trying to make. It's that the total loss, from the top of our block to the bottom of our block and everything in between, it was just erased.

Reinforced throughout the interviews is the ongoing nature of loss, which is sometimes hard to define:

There's an unsettledness, I don't know what it is, whether it's a lack of belonging, of not really knowing where you are or where you should be, and I think we both, very much, are still experiencing that. (Jude)

For Jude, who had lived in three different houses since hers was destroyed, our interview triggered memories of items she had not thought about since the disaster:

Tonight was the first time I thought of some red glassware and a painting, when I was sort of going through the lounge. It's bizarre that I hadn't thought of those pieces, but it just happens all the time.

The unpredictable and perpetual nature of discovering, or rediscovering, yet another loss can contribute to feelings of unsettledness.

Hanna, who was seven months pregnant on Black Saturday, said she felt 'robbed' of her son's first year. For her, the intangible loss was in the shape of an anticipated experience in the family home:

I think I cried once, and that was after the fire, and that was only because I was pregnant with him and I was like, 'I don't have a home to take him back to'. That was what made me more emotional, not losing everything, it was just like, 'we don't have anything to take', because we were living with my Mum and Dad for a few months.

One of the most fascinating themes to emerge during the analysis of the interview transcripts was the mundane, everyday items or actions that could no longer be assumed or taken for granted in the aftermath of Black Saturday. Many of the interviewees who suffered comprehensive loss (of home and possessions), said that frustration and anger often surfaced over inconsequential things or objects. Sometimes it would catch them by surprise. It either related to a routine or task that was carried out daily, such as cooking a meal, or an item that was used irregularly.

Carmen, whose home was successfully defended on the day, struggled to resume regular routines (in part due to the lack of electricity, water and telephone). She recalled feeling a similar way once before:

It reminded me of the stress when my mother died, you just cannot get yourself together to do it. Like for example, when my mother died, I couldn't even do the dishes, I couldn't even hang out the washing, I just couldn't do it. I had to ring up a neighbour to come and help me.

The strain of living in a post-bushfire landscape was, for Carmen, debilitating:

Because you sort of felt sick all the time, and you wanted to have good food, you wanted to eat, but you just didn't have the mental capacity to prepare a meal.

Her narrative highlighted that the shift in emotions about home and questioning the meaning of home is not restricted to those who were rendered homeless by the bushfire. Those living in the charred landscape – with neighbours absent through displacement – often needed to reassess their relationship with home. Prior to Black Saturday, Carmen (quoted above) would occasionally find herself thinking, ‘I’ll just live in Traralgon,’ mostly due to all the driving involved in living in Koornalla with her children:

I thought, ‘it wouldn’t worry me so much if I lost my home’, I didn’t think, but then, do you know what I mean, you think, ‘no, you probably understate that’. You understate, ‘it’s just a house’, but then as people come and they may never have been here before they really appreciate it and you go, ‘yeah, it is pretty good’.

Her narrative touched on meal preparation and that was a minor theme across five of the Gippsland narratives. Three participants mentioned that they couldn’t cook after the fires; they either didn’t have the mental capacity or they didn’t have their familiar objects (or proper cooking equipment) and they were in strange kitchens.

Pete, who lost everything, described the persistent sensation of discovering yet another item that was destroyed:

Pete: It’s ongoing all the time, because I rang my mother up, and I said, “Have you got a recipe for such and such?” And my sister was there, and she said, ‘You should have that’, and I said, ‘Yes, but it was gone in the fires’. She said, ‘Oh yeah, I never thought of that’. Everything. You’ve got nothing left except what you’ve got on.

M: That’s a shock.

Pete: It is. I mean, you go to do something and you haven’t got a screwdriver because it’s melted, and you haven’t got a shifting spanner, you’ve got to get another one, and that’s why I thought, ‘I’m not going to do this anymore, I’m not going to replace what I had’, because I had a lot of tools, a lot of expensive tools.

Another participant Kate, said that after experiencing Black Saturday one thing she would grab in future, on high fire risk days, would be her recipe book:

I couldn’t cook after the fires. I just found it so hard. I didn’t have anything that was familiar, the kitchen was different, the oven was different. I didn’t have the utensils, didn’t have the things in the pantry, but I just could not think of anything that I used to cook.

Jude, who at the time of the interview was seriously thinking about selling up, spoke at intervals about the ongoing feeling of unsettledness and what she struggled with post-bushfire:

There were things, such funny things like I forgot how to cook and it was so difficult to cook meals after the fire.

It was just incredible. I just didn’t want to do it at home, and I thought, ‘It’s because I haven’t got my recipe books’, but I couldn’t be inspired. I used to love cooking, and that was probably the

biggest change in me, that I found that really difficult, and I don't think I have the same drive that I had before.

I think I'm less organised than I was. But yeah, I couldn't read after the fires. I had great difficulty concentration wise, reading. I went to counselling but not for long, and it was around August, September I think, after the fires. I went for about six sessions I think and decided that I didn't need anymore.

That was another thing I was going to say. I hate going to the supermarket now, but I don't know that I ever loved going to the supermarket, but since the fires, I reckon, I don't know why, but I don't like going to the supermarket, and I cannot put my finger on what it is, but I'll do my best to get out of going there as much as I can, it's just a funny thing that I often wonder, 'Why?'

Robyn, who was living in a modified shed at the time of our interview said:

One day I had a really bad day over sticky tape. I didn't have any sticky tape, and I rang my neighbour and said, 'Have you got some sticky tape?' And she said, 'No, I've never had to use it just yet', and I said, 'I hate not having a house. I really hate not having a house', because sticky tape was something that you always had, and it took her about two minutes to drive down the road and make me a cup of tea. [laughter]

She said it was hard to remember what had and what hadn't been replaced, it could get confusing:

There's just different things that set you off, but it is the inconvenience of not having something that you could usually go and put your hand to.

Graham, whose home was damaged by the fire said:

When we want something it's bound to have been in the bottom shed, which is the one we lost, and you go to get something that's just insignificant but it's just not there.

Going to retrieve something and it not being there was a common theme across the narratives. This was particular but not exclusive to the displaced participants, where items, either inside or outside of the house, were destroyed on Black Saturday.

Changed relationship with possessions

Nearly all of the interviewees who were rendered homeless spoke about the change in their relationship or attitude to objects as a direct result of the Black Saturday fires:

M: Have you got a different relationship with possessions?

Kristina: Yeah. I still like possessions. I can't deny that.

M: Do you want less of them, or are you more selective or discerning?

Kristina: Yeah, if I am in a shop now, I go, 'Do I really need it, or do I want it?' So yeah.

M: You can separate needs from wants?

Kristina: Enormously, and I think that's because of the fires, and I wouldn't like my cupboards full anymore, like that. So, that's all learning.

When asked whether his relationship to objects had changed Pete said:

Pete: Oh Yeah, it has.

M: In what way?

Pete: Well, if somebody broke in here and took everything, I couldn't give a damn. As long as he leaves me a radio and a saucepan and a plate, I'll be happy. It's all I want. Yep (pause) Yes, it certainly has.

M: So you're not trying to replace things?

Pete: Hell no. All my mates who lost their houses (say): 'Go down to such and such, they've got a sale on. There's handsaws and there's skill saws and there's drop saws and there's all this'. I said, 'I don't want that rubbish. What am I going to do with it?' [chuckle] I just don't want it. I don't need it. 'Buy another chainsaw'. 'What do I want another chainsaw for? I've got one little old one. That will do. That somebody gave me after the fires, it's all I want'. Yep. Even what I've got in here now, it's too crowded [long pause].

M: 'Really?'

Pete: 'Yes. Yeah it is. [long silence] So [pause], no, the attitude has certainly changed on possessions.'

Pete was very clear about what he needed and what he wanted.

Thinking about her attitude to possessions Hanna said, 'it would be nice to have my wedding dress or a few little things but it doesn't matter, it's not so important. I used to be sentimental, but not so much anymore.'

The youngest interviewee, Elyse, who evacuated with her family, said: 'there's nothing that stands out over anything else that we would have taken with us, which is good, we're not materialistic,' and yet she does, 'miss a lot of stuff'.

For those whose home was destroyed often the objects they would save in future fires no longer exists, so 'there's really nothing much we would need to take anymore'. (Kate).

Conclusion

The losses that follow in the aftermath of a severe bushfire seem to cruelly cascade. How the Gippsland participants coped, or struggled to cope, with everyday life after profound loss and change was the primary focus.

It is important to validate loss that to the unaffected can appear small and insignificant. The Gippsland narratives reveal how 'the taken for granted daily routine', normality, can rupture suddenly and intensely.

Each individual has his or her own unique experience of Black Saturday and its aftermath; what was a universal experience, across those who were rendered homeless and those whose homes survived, was the unwanted change. The legacy of such a traumatic event, loss of control and loss of certainty, can cast a long shadow. For a substantial number of interviewees the upheaval continues to have a major effect on their lives. Their anticipated future no longer exists.

The connections that people had to their homes and possessions, often established over many years (and this is where life cycle becomes prominent) are a key factor in the post-disaster decision-making process. Several interviewees, who had lost everything in the bushfire, expressed a feeling of disorientation and uncertainty in relation to their identity. The Gippsland narratives strongly reinforced that post-disaster decision-making, within the context of comprehensive loss, is often overwhelming and complex.

This findings chapter has explored the relationship between possessions (including animals) and people; how the loss of objects is felt in everyday post-disaster life for years, and in all likelihood many more years to come.

Chapter Six

“I saw a bird”

Introduction

The profound changes caused by Black Saturday and how individuals, couples and families navigated their way through the days, weeks, months and years that followed is the primary focus of this chapter. How do people, post-bushfire, restore their everyday lives? The chapter begins by exploring the distinctly different experiences of those who were displaced and those who continued to live in the familiarity of their own home, but in an unrecognisable landscape. The decision-making required by the displaced, whether to rebuild or relocate, is a significant focus.



Image 9: The post-bushfire scarred landscape.

Stressful or traumatic events can often either unite or divide, and in some instances, a combination of both can occur. The impact that profound loss and change, caused by bushfire, has had on relationships (within and between families) and friendships will be considered.

Healing from a catastrophic bushfire is, for many, a long and frequently complex process. Some of the Gippsland participants resisted their changed life trajectories whilst others actively embraced opportunities for change. This chapter incorporates a diversity of perspectives and considers how gender, life cycle and socioeconomics can influence, either deeply or just a little, the experience of restoration. Whilst the repercussions of such an extreme event are predominantly negative there were positives where in some instances there was meaningful post-traumatic growth, which warranted acknowledgement and deeper understanding.

Post-bushfire landscape

Individuals, couples and families who were able to remain living in their intact or damaged home, or on their property in a caravan or shed, were struck by the starkness of the post-bushfire landscape. They spoke of the silence and the smell:

We didn't expect the blackness to be so bad. We actually left trees in the garden that were just sort of skeletal trees, thinking that; A, they might come back, which they weren't going to, and B. that they might just look better than not being there, but in actual fact it was better once we had taken them out. (Graham)

It was really depressing for about the first six months out here. The smell, everything smelt really putrid. And you know it was quiet. It was still, there were no birds, there were no animals. It was a very alien landscape for a really, really long time, because it was all grey and black. (Jackie)

It was horrible. You didn't want to go outside. You didn't want to go outside, it was just all black. There was not even one bird, and that was the most terrible thing of all. One day I remember, all of a sudden there was a bird. I went outside and I started crying – I saw a bird who would think – I saw one bird, and you were just beside yourself. You could hear them down by the creek, where there was more vegetation. (Carmen)

Some participants, who either stayed and defended or fled and returned days later, remarked on the invasive nature of the ash, it wasn't just the visual of the post-fire landscape they had to face each day:

The silt and the filth that was in my house for six months, of black soot and silt was revolting, and there was a stench. (Karen)

The living conditions in the charred landscape were similar to camping. There was no power:

Carmen: So we didn't have any water because all the plumbing into the tanks had sort of been destroyed and didn't have any pumps because they were burnt, and you know what I mean, the electricity supply was damaged because the shed where the supply went to, that was burnt down, all this type of thing, and of course no internet or phone.

M: How long did it take before you got your utilities back on?

Carmen: Well we got a generator from my husband's work if we wanted to do anything, and we used the barbeque for water. We got bottled water from the relief centre further on, so we lived off

bottled water for quite a long time...there was portable showers and toilets down at the monument site down there, so we would have showers down there.

Graham, who with his son, stayed to defend their property, spoke about the immediate aftermath.

A sense of division, which hinges on the decisions and behaviours during the crisis, is manifest:

Council wouldn't do it [remove or bury dead livestock], initially, because they said, 'Not our problem', because the coroner shut the district up as well, that prolonged everything. And it was fine for people that were not here, or had lost their places and evacuated. But the people that were here, we had no power. So we didn't have water except for getting a bucket out, we actually had a generator, which we linked into the system to get ourselves spasmodic power. But there was no power, the power poles all burnt down. It was about three to four weeks, I think, before we got power back, and we lived here while that was happening.

This minor theme, living at home in the immediate aftermath, will be further explored in the next chapter as it intersects with fire-affected people's experience of the official recovery response.

When the clean up and rebuilding began the noise and disruption of construction exacerbated the stress:

M: And was it hard living in the landscape afterwards?

Julia: It was, it was quite depressing because everywhere you looked there was burnt trees and driving into Traralgon there was, you know, like burnt houses. And in the clear-up time there was all the Grollo trucks taking people's houses to the tip and that was very, very distressing to see every time you drove, you saw somebody else's remains going. Yeah, that was really hard in the first few weeks; it just seemed so brutal at first.

Karen: And the building process around us was horrific. Because there was so many houses in this area being built, the builders were just the pits. We ended up ringing police and they didn't do a lot.

In some of the interviews with older participants there was recognition that, due to where they were in their life cycle, they would not witness the full restoration of the landscape:

Look, in 30 years you establish it a certain way, and we'll be years away from getting back to there, if ever, and certainly not the trees that were established. (Erik)

Len and his wife owned the most land of all the participants and had lived for 37 years on their property, said:

Yeah, it was a bit frightening because you felt like you were exposed. It's probably a bit like either robbery or theft, you feel like you've been put through the wringer so to speak.

Displaced: urban living

As stated in Chapter Four the 33 participants – who generated the Gippsland narratives – were drawn from 25 households.³⁰ Twelve homes were destroyed. The displaced Gippsland

³⁰ Three families generated six interviews: a mother, father and their adult daughter (interviewed separately); a father and his adult son (interviewed separately); a mother and her adult daughter (interviewed together).

participants encountered a diversity of living circumstances following Black Saturday. The majority of those who were rendered homeless sought immediate refuge with family or friends. Some of these participants experienced minimal disruption after the second move (when they had vacated their emergency stop gap). Others made multiple moves over a relatively short period of time either during the rebuilding of their new home or in pursuit of their powerful desire to feel settled. Caravans and modified sheds were a common option for people who had lost their homes.

One displaced interviewee said she and her husband were ‘paying quite high rent’ so after they received their ‘lump sum’ from the insurance company she thought, ‘What a waste of money. I can’t stand this’, and purchased their first house which was:

A small modern home in an area of Traralgon that is very new...I found it pretty depressing...and no trees and really sterile...I tried to tell myself that it was good, but really it wasn’t me, so we moved in here [second purchased house in Traralgon] and did it up. (Jude)

Jude described how it felt to be displaced.

It was this incredible sense of not having anything just this lack of having anything that was mine really.

There’s an unsettledness, I don’t know what it is, whether it’s a lack of belonging, of not really knowing where you are, or where you should be, and I think we both, very much, are still experiencing that. And you think, I don’t know, I can’t explain it because I was even thinking that it was getting too much for us out there, and so if we had moved I wouldn’t have felt like I do now. I think it’s this being forced into something, and the decisions. You know the lack of involvement of things in your life.

Five other participants, from three families, purchased a house in Traralgon. Three interviewees, from the same family, lived in the small township of Traralgon South with their son/brother. One couple, Erik and Marilyn, lived in town for a year and then spent the next year living in their modified shed during the rebuilding: ‘We didn’t enjoy the winter; outside shower and outside toilet, it was miserable, it was awful’. (Erik)

One woman, her husband and young daughter, became homeless on Black Saturday:

Lisa: We went straight into the Real Estate agents on the Monday and got a place to rent, and we lucked out because it was fully furnished. It was an absolute dump and it was overpriced, but it was somewhere to hang our hats while we rebuilt.

M: Was that in Traralgon?

Lisa: That was in Traralgon.

M: How was it living there?

Lisa: Horrible.

M: You didn't like it?

Lisa: Hated every second of it.

M: How long were you there for?

Lisa: 44 weeks.

M: You know exactly?

Lisa: Know exactly – 44 weeks to the day we were stuck in Traralgon, yeah.

The word 'horrible', in association with urban living, crops up frequently in the narratives of the displaced.

Life, post-bushfire, for many of the displaced was complicated and highly stressful. Hanna, who was 7 months pregnant at the time of the crisis, initially moved into her parents' home in Melbourne. Four weeks later they relocated to rented accommodation in Morwell. 'It was horrible,' for 14 months. The family of four then spent half a year living in their shed:

It was pretty crappy and my son, who wasn't walking yet, so he was crawling through mud and because it was winter it was freezing. We had a portable shower outside of the shed, so having showers and stuff was quite a bit of a feat, but yeah, look we were so much happier, just being here and not being away from here. (Hanna)

Their fourth and final move was into their new rebuilt home at the end of 2010.

Paul described a similar level of upheaval. His wife was eight-and-a-half months pregnant when their home was destroyed. Initially the family (the couple and his two daughters whose care he shares with his first wife) lived with their friends in their large home in Rosedale. After their son was born:

We got a place in town [Traralgon] that was probably a big mistake. It was a kind-hearted offer from someone...it just sort of felt like you couldn't say 'no'. Everyone was trying to do so much and it was just one of these things looking back, it was a mistake. They offered us this house for free...it turned out if we could have got in elsewhere, a better place and that, we could have got rent assistance and it would have been better to have done that...it turned out it was not liveable. (Paul)

For his family the temporary accommodation had major repercussions long after they had vacated the property. The cramped and uncomfortable living conditions – the mix of teenagers and a newborn – compounded the stress of their displacement.³¹

Another displaced interviewee, whose children were aged 16 and 20 at the time, said that their temporary accommodation was:

³¹ This thread is picked up in 'relationships and friendships' theme deeper into the chapter.

Half the size that we were used to so we had to live all together...there was no space for nobody. You've got the three bedrooms looking into each other's bed, and a small living room with one telly, so yeah, we had to adapt a lot. It was good. It was a perfect lesson to deal and live with each other. (Kristina)

When Kristina began to design their new home, shortly after the fires, she drew inspiration from the family's experience of living in a smaller house:

All I knew, and my husband as well, like I wanted this square box. Just don't have any waste of space; that was very, very clear. Before the fires I would have liked all the houses with a rumpus room, with a theatre room, you know, when you have a choice. And I couldn't care less to put it in the new house. I wanted one big space to live in.

Living in a small house meant that her family had to deal with each other and 'interact and have conversations. In a house with all rooms, people go everywhere'. (Kristina)

Residing in Traralgon during the rebuilding made Kristina realise that, 'we're so privileged to live here'.

We lived a year in town and it was awful. The convenience was good, but no, the streetlights, it was bright light at night time, and sounds, and yeah, people everywhere.

Her appreciation of 'place' deepened as a direct result of her displacement.

Living amongst non fire-affected people in larger towns was often painful. Most of the participants, who lived in temporary accommodation, whilst they rebuilt or decided what to do, remarked on their dislike of the urban landscape. They had returned to nothing and out of necessity for shelter, were forced to relocate to a densely populated town. The bushfire caused unprecedented disruption to every aspect of their lives. A few of the displaced Gippsland interviewees consciously emphasised the positive aspects of their changed circumstances, but in the main, it was an experience that was endured and for a few at the time of interview, continues to be tolerated.

Wendy, who played a major part in the community recovery effort, expressed concern for the displaced:

I really feel sorry for those that lost their homes and they were in Traralgon and they were trying to live amongst that, ...you speak to any one of them and they all really hated it, it was just awful because they weren't around people that understood, and these people, as nice and friendly as they are, they just didn't understand, and it was really, really hard for people to live like that.

The potential or desire to unite after the traumatic event was diluted when those rendered homeless were displaced to Rosedale (a small town), Morwell (the second largest town) and Traralgon (the largest town) in the Latrobe Valley.

Across the Gippsland narratives were some passionate comments about the sensory stresses associated with living in an urban environment. Those who were displaced objected to the proximity of neighbours, the streetlights and the noise. The passion of one interviewee was expressed by an unfinished question:

M: And what's it like living in an environment where...?

Cass: Horrible.

M: It's horrible?

Cass: Living in town, horrible.

M: Obviously you're missing the landscape?

Cass: Yeah, I mean don't get me wrong, the house that we've got [purchased] is a lovely house...but it's this traffic continually, and you hear the neighbours talking out in their yard. The bloke next door is a hot-rod driver and its rev, rev, rev, and then of course, his mates all come around on the weekend with their cars.

Cass identified what she missed the most since being displaced from the family's 11 acres:

Cass: No birdlife, we had lots of birds and we used to feed our rosellas and we would have rainbow lorikeets that would come and tap on our window and they would bring their young around to show us their young, and the kookaburras that were always out there, and you just miss all that.

M: Is it hard being amongst people who might have no understanding or comprehension of what you've been through?

Cass: Yeah, very much. Very much because you'll get people that will, even in conversations you weren't supposed to hear, or that they forgot that you were part of that, that within the first months, I'm so sick and tired of hearing about these people have got nothing and I think, 'Well, go through it, and see what it's like, you know,' and it was a little bit hard to take, and I still, even still now, we're having great difficulty.

Keeping in touch with their community – those whose homes were intact within the fire-affected region – was challenging. Kate, whose family was temporarily displaced to a rental property in Traralgon, noted the absence of communication:

Because we were living in town, things were happening out here that we would hear about it after it had happened, because there was no way people organising things could contact everyone, because they didn't have everyone's contact details anymore.

Once away from the charred landscape she was conscious of those left behind and felt for her neighbour who had to confront it daily:

I felt sorry for Sue next door because yeah, she was looking at the ruins of what our community was, and like four houses out of seven in our street were burnt down, and she had to pass that every day to get her son to school. So yeah, I feel for them because that would be very difficult. (Kate)

Another female interviewee echoed her sentiment, giving thought to her neighbours who had all worked:

So hard to clean up the gardens that were burned and to clean the house that was all dirty, because of the fire, and then they lived in this eerie area with no lights, no sound. It must have been horrible. (Kristina)

Kristina, who gained insight from living in smaller accommodation, felt that her family's temporary absence continued to have a ripple effect:

The next step [after moving in], was for me to concentrate on the people, of what this community has going on, what we missed out on all these 13 months, because we were out of town. We didn't have that contact with what was happening in the area, and that's very frustrating, and I think still.

Those who were forced to live in town, away from their fire-affected neighbourhood, felt isolated and those who stayed, either in their intact, damaged homes or in a caravan or shed on their property, found living in the post-bushfire landscape emotionally (and at times physically) challenging; neither option was preferable.

Rebuild or relocate?

The individuals and couples who became homeless on Black Saturday had to immediately find temporary accommodation, whilst contemplating making major decisions about their future, whether to rebuild or permanently relocate. For some participants the decision to rebuild was an easy one:

We wanted to get back really quickly, we were always going to come back, straight from the word go. (Paul)

We never ever thought of not coming back, well I never did and I don't think my husband did give it a thought. (Marilyn)

Well we had two choices. Buy in town or move back out here and if we moved back out here we had to build, so there wasn't really much choice because we thought, 'Well we didn't choose to move out of the area, we would have stayed if this hadn't happened,' so yeah, we decided we would rebuild. (Kate)

We were very sure about what we wanted to do. (Kristina)

It's where we like to be, it's home. (Robyn)



Image 10: The ‘For Sale’ sign was a common sight whilst I was conducting interviews in the Latrobe Valley.

When couples were united the decision was straightforward. In several instances, where there was disagreement about whether to rebuild or relocate, the decision was more fraught:

I mean I want to go back and I’ve got a design of the house that I want, straight away we did that, but my husband is not ready to go back. (Cass)

My husband didn’t want to rebuild...He wanted to buy somewhere but we didn’t find anywhere to, he was still looking after the footings went in. I said, ‘Well you can’t look anymore because they’ve started’. The minute they started that was it. (Lisa)

Wendy observed:

It’s been really, really tough on many, many relationships for that very reason, and there’s been couples where, ‘Okay, I want to go back,’ and ‘I can’t go back,’ so what do they do? One desperately needs to be back on his land where he was, and the other one desperately can’t do it, so relationships end, and that’s just part of it as well.

Life stage, for some of the older homeless participants, was cited as a major factor in their decision to relocate:

Also, a lot of the people in the Estate are a similar age to us, but they started 30 years ago and I feel it needs young people. We're too old to start completely again, so that was why we're here [Traralgon], and we've sort of stayed here, it's small and it drives me crazy. (Jude)

I mean they can go through the home loan, rebuild and start off, whereas us, we haven't got that 25 years on a home loan. (Cass)

We were probably only going to be there another five to ten years anyway, and to me, that made life a lot easier for me to accept the fact that, 'Okay, we've got burnt out. We've been paid out'. We've got enough money to come and buy something reasonably nice in Traralgon and make a new life, because probably what the fire did was that it expedited the decision to move into town, that's probably what it did. Now having said that, if we hadn't of got burnt out, who knows, I might have turned 80 out there, I've got no idea. (Harley)

Several older interviewees who decided to rebuild spoke about memories of their younger years:

It was just an enormous task. I mean it's certainly different to the excitement of the first time around in making plans and building the nest and then having family come along. It's certainly different the second time around, yeah.' (Erik)

We did find it harder just physically too, well it was over 20 years since we did it all last. (Kate)

For several of the fire-affected interviewees the decision to rebuild was fuelled, in part by defiance. They spoke about arson (which the majority of interviewees never mentioned) and made links to the cause of the fire and their decision to rebuild:

I think part of the reason we rebuilt was basically to tell the little shit that the fire was up yours, it didn't beat us, whereas if we had a bit more hindsight, or thought it through a bit more we wouldn't have rebuilt. (Lisa)

Yeah, we like the area, we like the place. We don't want somebody telling us we can't be here by burning it down on us, and that's the stubborn streak. We can manage to do it, so while we're fit enough to do it we figure we may as well. (Colin)

Unsettledness featured across interviews, with those who had decided to rebuild and those who had decided to relocate. Questioning their decision, about where home would or could be, was common:

M: How was it when you actually walked into your house when it was finished?

Lisa: It was good because we were out of Traralgon, but to this day it still doesn't feel like home, it's just a house, and I think a lot of it is because we resent it, because we had to do it.

Jude: So I make decisions, and then I think, probably a year later, probably after the, no, more than the first anniversary, maybe even this year, I thought, 'My goodness, I hope I haven't made mistakes. What have I done?' But it's sterile; it's still sterile now.

Paul: Every couple of days I go through a cycle of, 'Should we just sell the whole bloody joint and just go and start again?' because this doesn't feel like home anymore.

Only two interviews featured positive responses about living in their new home. Thirteen months after the fires had destroyed the family home, which was due to be sold; Kristina described how she felt after the rebuilding was complete:

I was dancing, like having a baby. I've been on this cloud for days. No, it was fantastic; it was absolutely great to get the key and to move in, yeah.

She stated that, 'this was home straight away,' and that she could, 'do this again, to build. I wouldn't have any problems to sell it and to move on'. Partly, due to her experience of migrating to Australia and her temperament, she felt strongly that, 'I would be able to adapt again to a new situation'. (Kristina)

A couple, whose Callignee home was destroyed, moved into a new house on a recently established estate in Traralgon:

M: So can you talk to me about how you felt moving here?

Irena: I loved it.

Leon: It's beautiful. We've got everything that opens and shuts. The central heating, you just come home and flick the switch and bingo, you know, it's fabulous.

Irena: Yes, it beats chopping that wood every day.

Leon: Well that's right.

Irena had wanted to move from their Callignee property for some years prior to Black Saturday.

One couple (interviewed separately) were living in a shed on their acre-and-a-half whilst they were in the process of rebuilding their new home. In regards to the scale of the design Robyn said:

We probably would have done it differently now if...we would probably go a bit smaller than what we've done.

Her husband Colin, echoed that sentiment:

We did over-design the damn thing...the plans are on the wall over there. But it's 30 squares, and we could have done with a lot less, but neither of us liked the idea of a dog box. And we also built it because at our age, we might not be able to handle this block for the next 15 or 20 years, and it would be nice to sell something that will give us enough equity that we can replace and go into a home or a smaller house, that we choose. You need to cover that.

Several displaced interviewees drew on the opportunity to improve on their old home, gaining a positive from a stressful situation:

We recreated it to be a bit better than what we had, and we spoilt ourselves a little bit after going through what we've been through, but we deserved a few extra perks. (Lisa)

Paul, who found the living conditions in their temporary accommodation extremely taxing, expressed regret at the dimensions of their new home:

Because we rebuilt and we didn't want to just, you want to try and build a future, so we went a bit, probably borrowed some more. We borrowed more money. We're further in debt than we were before the fires. That's by choice, we chose to build something bigger, but that was, I think, adrenaline partly, partly naivety of thinking that we needed to do that, to make the place worthwhile coming back to. There was a bit of you sort of thinking, 'this is a shit thing to happen. Let's make something good out of it, we'll have a nice new flash house,' when, given time, if we had started it now there would be lots of things different. There would be lots of less pressure.

A non-displaced interviewee, who suffered severe losses across his farm, remarked on the architectural change in the fire-affected landscape:

I haven't actually talked to people that have put their places up for sale, [after rebuilding] but one thing is very noticeable, people have put themselves in more expense, mortgage-wise. I don't think there are any houses that are the same size, or smaller, they're bigger. All of them are bigger and brighter. (Len)

The absence of natural screening, due to the destruction of the bush, meant the changes to the architectural landscape might have appeared more imposing; potentially magnifying the impact of new structures. Len's observation, of the appearance of bigger and brighter buildings, is a reminder of the complexity of emotions experienced by the non-displaced survivors of Black Saturday. They lived in the charred landscape and endured the, seemingly endless, disruption of construction. They witnessed larger, more imposing, homes materialise across their, no longer familiar, landscape. Pete described the bigger buildings as, 'A trap. A big trap'.

Len: See, I know some people, and he's 70. He's had to go back to work because, built this huge house after the fire and had to get another mortgage. I said, 'Why did you do that?'

M: So what did he say?

Len: Just shrugged his shoulders, and, yeah. He said, 'I don't know'.

Pete had a strong desire to remain on his land. 'It was the day after the fires. I just said 'Well, I'm not shifting'. After exploring the option of a kit home, he decided to build his own shelter.

Yeah, so I had all that cleared and cleaned up, and just to give myself a bit of a break, I was going to build a house over there, where all that gravel is. I had it levelled out, but I changed my mind and built this, and this is all I want.

Pete lived in a donated caravan whilst he built, what was initially a shed, to live in, that eventually grew into a two-bedroom home:

M: It's kind of nice how your situation, this has evolved and this is your home, and maybe it wasn't, was that the plan when...?

Pete: No, it wasn't the plan, I don't think, although no, I don't know. I never really had a plan. No, I didn't have a plan.

He was living in basic circumstances, but importantly, on his cherished land:

No, I still love this little block of land. Yeah, I don't think, I just like sitting where you are, or outside at the table and I'm very content.

His structure, for one person, was substantially more modest than the original home he had built for his family of four from scratch.

Contentedness was rare amongst the participants who had been displaced or who continued to feel displaced. Several men and women – living in purchased homes in Traralgon or rebuilt homes on their land – spoke about the futility of trying to make their new house a home:

But I think, yeah, the biggest problem is my unsettledness and for me, it's just because all my history for the last 14 years is just gone, there's nothing about the place that's the same, and you're sort of doing everything to try and make it the same, and you can't. (Paul)

Others described a slow transition of acceptance:

It was a house, it wasn't a home, and I suppose gradually it's becoming our home again, I think. I mean its beaut, it has all nice new materials and new-fangled gadgetry in the place but we wanted the old one. (Erik)

A few believed that the transition from 'house' to 'home' would occur naturally over time. A woman who had lived in the region for 23 years described how she anticipated her new house would, eventually, start to feel like home:

Well I think the fires have taught me something. We rebuilt the house and moved in, and we thought, 'That's just empty', and also, like the day of the fires, there were four of us living here and when we moved back, there were only two of us, so it's like the empty nest as well. But it made me realise that it's people that create memories, because we don't have our things anymore. It's family coming and going, and photos on the wall, and yes, you've lost all your sentimental things but you can recreate memories I guess. I found just having the family home and my daughter coming up from Melbourne and my son calling in, that's starting to create memories. So it's starting to feel like home again. (Kate)

What is reinforced by the Gippsland narratives is the, often powerful, yearning for home. Returning to nothing and trying to re-establish home was, for many, a painful and difficult process. Some of the Gippslanders remain unsettled in their new environment: their search for home is unresolved. Moving into a new home, one that has been rebuilt in the same location, or one that has been purchased elsewhere, can either lessen unsettledness or it can stir up uncertainty and prolong it. Importantly, all of the participants who found themselves homeless in the wake of the fire focused on acquiring a new home via purchasing outright with insurance payouts or through a new or replenished mortgage. Building or buying a home was the key

focus: none of the participants were willing or prepared to rent for a significant period of time. It is vital to consider the non-displaced who faced the uncertainty of living, on a large building site and having no or minimal input or control, over how the architectural landscape would be developed once all the construction was completed.

Emotions after trauma

Anger and guilt were dominant emotions across many of the Gippsland narratives. All of the participants had their lives suddenly disrupted – to varying degrees – by the disaster and each reacted in their own way to their changed circumstances.

Some participants were angry about the source of the fire. Karen, whose home survived, said:

You see scraps of melted twisted metal, and you think, ‘This was all because someone chose on a ridiculous day to set fires going’, and it’s really, really hard. We were angry for a long time, the anger in me, I wasn’t upset, I was angry. I was angry for six months, so angry.

M: Do you think it would have been different if it was a lightning strike?

Karen: Definitely. It still would have been tragic but I would not have had that anger. To see the unnecessary waste and like we nearly lost friends. How they didn’t die in their house, it’s just a miracle.

Her anger was also triggered by the lack of compassion from her husband’s workplace:

He actually had to beg for time off, I was so angry. I was so angry with his work. I actually rang up his HR department because he took long service leave, they didn’t volunteer. He took that day off. There was no offer of just compassionate leave or taking time, so he said, ‘What do I need to do?’ ‘Well take some of your long service leave then’, so he did, he took a week’s long service leave. So at least they allowed him that on short notice, but I thought it was poor form.

Sandra’s anger was prompted by the allocation of donated goods in the wake of the disaster:

I was furious. Furious with a lot of people that I could see were just taking stuff because they could. Whether they wanted it or not, just because they could: I really did [feel] resentment.

Her anger was not restricted to fire affected people she had never met:

I even told my sister the other day, because she lost her house and I was a bit angry at her too, ...I was angry at everybody that was getting stuff and no one was coming giving me any, and it was really insane. It was illogical really. It wasn’t right, I shouldn’t have been doing it, but I was doing it. Everyone does different things.

I told her the other day. I said to her, ‘I did that very badly against you’, and she goes, ‘Well really?’ I said, ‘Yes, because you were getting everything. No one gave me anything’. She goes, ‘Didn’t they?’ She assumed I was getting what she was getting. She didn’t even know I wasn’t until I told her. She goes, ‘Really? I didn’t realise that’. I said, ‘No, all those people you used to tell me all the time, they’re giving me this, that and the other’, and I’m thinking, ‘Are they really?’ and she said, ‘I didn’t realise you weren’t getting anything’. ‘No, I wasn’t’.

The official recovery effort and how assistance was received or accessed, who was benefiting and who was not, was a significant theme that required further consideration. This sense of division – between those whose home survived and those whose home was destroyed – will be explored in the following chapter.

Sandra, who was angry at being overlooked, also remarked on the guilt sometimes felt by those whose home survived:

A lot of people felt guilty that they had a house and the others didn't. Well I didn't feel that because to me, whoever missed out getting their house burnt or whatever, to me it's what is meant to be, is what's meant to be. I didn't even think that way, but a lot of people did. They didn't want to tell anybody that they still had a house.

Robyn, who was undergoing chemotherapy whilst living in a modified shed, made brief mention of anger:

We've got heating in the shed, and it's quite comfortable in that way, but it is very close quarters. The toilet and shower is outside; they're builders' ones. With that I get a bit angry sometimes, with the doing the chemo, if you're not feeling really good to actually get up in the morning and go out in the cold, but other than that, most of it's been okay, but you do just get a bit annoyed at times.

Her concern was for the anger experienced by the men in the community and how women and families had to cope with that since the disaster:

I think a lot of us women have found that we've sort of 'lost our men'. In a lot of ways they've changed. My husband hasn't worked since the fires. He's very, very forgetful, can't keep things straight. The anger has dropped off a lot now, thank goodness, but they're just not there, and a lot of the guys now, even though mine, he's sort of reacted fairly early, a lot of the guys are now just starting to, they're just starting to come to awareness that they're not right, and you know, the families have had to live with that for the whole two odd years.

Robyn's husband Colin, who was interviewed separately, referred to being on medication for the first time in his life and how:

Everyone's telling me at the moment, 'No, you're not going back to work just yet because you're a cranky bugger'. So there you go. I just, yeah, not a good thing, not a good place.

This connects with male identity and the psychological and emotional challenges, which can be triggered by comprehensive loss and the repercussions of having no, or very little, control.

Cass said she had not talked much about her experience of Black Saturday. She disliked living in Traralgon, where her family purchased a house, and expressed frustration that the mainstream media had neglected the Latrobe Valley. She felt strongly that other, more densely populated, fire affected locations in Victoria, where the majority of fatalities occurred, had a higher profile:

I was very angry at the people of Kinglake and Marysville because all the media was centred on them. We were really forgotten and not mentioned hardly at all. It made me very, very angry. You

go down and, 'Where are you from? Did they get fire out there?' 'Well yeah.' I mean we still lost lives and all the homes. I think it was 192 homes that burnt out, so it's still a huge amount. (Cass)

Kristina echoed this feeling, of being, or seeming to be ignored by the media and consequently the Australian public:

What was terrible was that we didn't know what happened here. There was nothing broadcasted. Nothing on the telly, it was all Marysville. It was all about – and then you get angry – not angry. It's a powerless feeling.

Jude, who in an attempt to feel settled, purchased with her husband, a second house in Traralgon, reflected on the decision to relocate:

Jude: I felt a lot of guilt too when we decided not to go back.

M: Did you?

Jude: Yeah. A lot of guilt, and I think [my husband] did too, that we were letting the community down.

Their decision to buy a house in town was personal, but they felt a sense of obligation to the neighbourhood and the wider community of Traralgon South.

The word 'guilt' was prominent in Paul's interview. Paul began his interview by talking about guilt:

Well there's been a fair few tragedies in the short period since ... which means that focus slips a fair bit, and that can be a bit – it's hard in our case I think – I'm not speaking for anyone else but myself, but you don't want to be a victim forever. But sometimes you don't also want to be forgotten, and so you sort of feel guilty for thinking, 'I need a bit of help still, or someone just to listen'. But you also think, 'Well shit, other poor buggers are now in the same or worse position than what we were', so that adds a level of guilt or frustration depending on the day.

Several participants referred to the emotions of other people and how they did or didn't manage them. Kristina said, after their new home was built, she had to deal with 'negative reactions, with people, with jealousy: I don't know but it's something I can't carry'. Jackie, who was not displaced, mentioned feeling judged by other people. She referred to a division:

You can observe it ... because you're here and you've still got everything, but you fought bloody hard to keep it. My husband and I feel quite proud of the fact that we did it.

M: It's a huge achievement.

Jackie: Yeah, but a lot of other people, they say, 'You should never have stayed, it was just too big of a risk'.

M: Really?

Jackie: Yeah. And then you get into arguments sometimes. Yeah. 'You should never have stayed. You know, it's only a house, it's always replaceable'. So that came into it as well, which you'll hear that over and over again, no doubt.

Guilt was less pronounced than anger and was frequently connected to other fire-affected people being regarded as ‘worse off’, in relation to levels of loss.

Crisis unites and divides

A universal theme that emerged across the Gippsland narratives was changes (or challenges) in family relationships, the loss of old friends and the acquisition of new friends.

In the aftermath of Black Saturday, two participants had direct experience, of relationship breakdown. Pete, who built a shed to live in on his 16 acres in Callignee, said:

After I buried all the animals, which is another story, but anyway, I went next door and lived over there. He's got a shed, he's a single man, and I shifted the caravan over there because I had absolutely nothing here, at least he had some water and some solar power, which I've got, and then what happened? Yeah, my wife said she wasn't coming back because of all the animals and the house and everything, and I said, 'Well, I'm staying', so I haven't really spent any time away from the block, other than sleeping next door.

Having no insurance intensified Pete's experience of the comprehensive loss of his marriage, home, possessions, and livestock. The couple's home and contents insurance had lapsed: 'I've been paying insurance for 33 years, and you're five weeks out, and bang'. This was a painful discovery for Pete after the bushfire. Their marriage was in trouble prior to Black Saturday and 'the fire tipped it over the edge'

The youngest male participant Adam, who was married a few weeks before our interview, felt unsupported by his then partner who appeared unable or unwilling to grasp the severity of what he had survived on Black Saturday:

Just after the fire, I had been in another long-term relationship, and she was based in Tasmania and it had been a long distance relationship for about six years, and that sort of ended. It was pretty much ended before, but we both decided enough is enough.

Interviewees often mentioned relationships or marriages being in trouble or dissolved in the months after the bushfire. But mostly the comments about relationship breakdown were anecdotes from outside the interviewee's immediate circle of family and friends.

Julia: I know of some men who were depressed and not been able to get on with their lives, and a lot of men went through a lot and some of the women said, 'Well, we're getting on with it,' and in other couples it's the other way around.

Gordon: Yeah, their strength has changed.

M: I see, the dynamic of the relationship?

Gordon: Yeah.

M: That's interesting.

Julia: Yeah, I think so, but like Gordon said, the strengths have changed in the relationship. Some are working together to achieve, to move forward and others, you know, this one needs a prop-up this week, but that one needs a prop-up that week. Even within couples it's up and down.

One woman remarked on the illnesses and deaths amongst the fire affected residents, reminding us that the Black Saturday fatalities didn't stop on the 9 February 2009. She said (to me and her husband):

It's also caused a lot of family breakdowns in that, quite often Mum and the kids don't want to come back and Dad wants to come back, and so there's been a number of families breaking up which is really very sad too. Well wouldn't you say that the whole dynamic of the population changed, in that we've really got more people? The old farming families are dying out aren't they? (Kaye)

Prior to Black Saturday Elyse, who was 25 years of age at the time of the disaster, divided her life between her home in Callignee which was destroyed, and a share house in Melbourne. The lack of understanding from her core group of friends in Melbourne was confronting:

Elyse: My friends are in Melbourne, the people that I work with and do gigs with, they're all in Melbourne, and they have no idea.

M: Really?

Elyse: None at all.

M: Is that annoying?

Elyse: Yeah, it's beyond annoying. Like it breaks your heart that your closest friends and the people that you spend the most time with and share the most with – like playing music, that's a constantly sharing thing – and they've got no idea and don't see it as my trauma. I've lost my house; I've lost my stuff. I've lost my home. I've lost friends.

Because her closest friends did not understand her trauma, she felt that she had become 'a lot more withdrawn'. The thread of her narrative, specifically her experience of the official recovery effort, which magnified her pain, will feature in the next chapter.

Her father, in a separate interview, was equally critical of his friends who were, in the main, silent:

Colin: Well it's amazing. You actually learn who your friends really are, and 90 per cent of the people that you know, 95 per cent, are only associates.

M: Really?

Colin: Yeah. They're only associates. I mean we've had friends from Melbourne who have contacted us once in two-and-a-half years, where we used to see them every couple of months. We've had other friends who don't know how to talk to you. They just think, 'Why aren't you over

it already?’ So you don’t get the assistance that you thought you would have got from those that you call friends, ... if you’ve got one or two good friends in your life, you’re exceptionally lucky.

Paul referred to the damage done to his relationship with one of his teenage daughters in the aftermath of Black Saturday when they were living temporarily in Traralgon:

I think it was very hard. That was part of the problem [my wife] and I sort of clashed a bit, probably expecting her to step up a little bit when I should have been giving her a bit more support, because she’s already been mature for her age, so I probably expected a bit more from her than I should have. I probably should have given her a bit more breathing space.

He had multiple stressors to contend with: the inappropriate temporary accommodation; the life stage of his daughter; the timing of their son being born so soon after Black Saturday; the first post-bushfire winter; and his temperament. All major contributors to their relationship breakdown:

It actually was hard, there was a few things happened. The eldest daughter and I had a big barney, and she moved out and things just sort of went haywire, and it was just that living on top of each other. Whereas out here she would have her horse, and when we had any sort of issues she would be outside, and there was a buffer zone, whereas in there [Traralgon], there was no buffer zone, and I hate living in town too, so I was not going to be probably nice to be around all the time anyway. (Paul)

This situation, of the fractured relationship with his daughter, raised the issue of how the role and ‘sense of place’ can have an impact on personal wellbeing and relationships. The loss of ‘sense of place’, in this context of displacement caused by bushfire and living in cramped and unsuitable accommodation in an urban landscape, caused friction within the marriage and between the generations in the family. The examples above (of fractured relationships between friends and within a family) demonstrate the potential for conflict in the aftermath of a stressful event that triggered upheaval and displacement.

Five participants talked about the stress of their disagreements about where their home was or should be. A displaced older couple spoke openly about their relationship difficulties that were present prior to Black Saturday. They relocated to a new housing estate in Traralgon:

M: So what’s your long term plan? You want a house up there [Callignee]?

Leon: Oh yes.

M: So you won’t live here?

Leon: No, Irena is going to live here.

Irena: I’m staying here and he’s going there. So it’s a separation.

Leon: Yeah, she’s had enough of me.

Irena: Mm. It’s not divorcing, but just not living together.

Cass said her husband was, ‘not keen on moving back’, to their 11 acres in Callignee and, ‘at this stage he’s still having troubles’. Meanwhile she described herself as being stuck living in a house they purchased in Traralgon:

M: So is it reassuring to know that it’s temporary; it’s not for the long term? Does that help you?

Cass: No, because I think it will be for long term. Even though I want to move back out, I can’t see us doing it, so it’s very hard to take, but what do you do? I don’t want to just move out there and leave my husband because he wants to stay in. I mean we’re a family unit, so we just have to make some compromises, both of us.

Despite buying a house there was uncertainty; they still owned their 11 acres but she has no hope that the family will ever return to live on their land.

That feeling of unsettledness and division within a marriage or relationship was not restricted to those who were rendered homeless by the bushfire. One couple, whose home survived, encountered unprecedented difficulties in their marriage as the wife wanted to remain living in their home and the husband (who was not interviewed) wanted to relocate:

I knew [my husband] was not happy and I’m thinking, ‘I have to leave. We might have to go. I might have to give up here because I want my marriage’. My marriage is more important than my house, and my area and all that sort of stuff. (Karen)

She said they were, ‘at loggerheads because we were at different spaces, and so we sat down and talked about it and just said, “Okay. Alright, what are we going to do?”’

Having experienced the stress of rebuilding, Hanna acknowledged the toll it could have on a relationship:

I know a few who have split up, and I knew a few that had problems but have now reconciled and come back.... I can see how that could happen because there was lots of tensions and stuff between us at times, but in the end, I think, for us it’s been a really good thing, because I think we both wanted the same thing in the end. That helped a lot.

Post-traumatic growth

On a positive note, the shared experience of bushfire created opportunities for new friendships to emerge.

Julia emphasised the meaningful connections she had made and the personal growth that had occurred:

Well, it has made a lot of changes to me. I was a working person and it was pretty much, you know, I would come home and stay home, and that was it... I didn’t know many neighbours, even after 30 years. But now since the fires, I know a lot more people, and I can call on my friends.

Two female participants who had lived for decades in the fire-affected region remarked on how they had, become or always had, been disconnected from their community.

Sandra attended a meeting after the bushfire:

There were all these people and I thought, 'I don't even know any of these people. Where do they live? Who are they?' And I thought, 'No, I'll have to get out more, I don't know any of these people'.

Kaye said:

We weren't very much involved in the community. We sort of did our own thing'... (and now she's)... 'been into houses I've never been into in, well 40 years since we've been here, so that's an upside to it all'.

Hanna, the interviewee who had lived the shortest amount of time in the region prior to the disaster, remarked on her broad social network:

Since the fires it's been amazing...we've met so many more people than we probably would have even being here and not having the fires. Just through local events and bits and pieces and people talking to people, because you've got a common interest and stuff, it's kind of nice...It's a bit of a bonding thing I guess.

What is clear, through the words of the four female interviewees who spoke of an enriched social network, is that there is not necessarily a correlation between the length of time in a place and the size and strength of a social network. An event that affects many people, in this instance a severe bushfire, can unify and connect residents through new forums, groups and shared circumstances. Establishing new friendships overlaps with another minor theme that emerged, healing through creativity. This theme incorporates post-traumatic growth and it will surface again in the next chapter.

Life trajectory

The Gippsland interviewees talked at length about comprehensive change at all levels, personal, family, neighbourhood and community; the micro and meso. Adapting to that unwanted and sudden change, sometimes letting go completely of the anticipated future they had envisaged, was difficult and, in several instances, very painful and unresolved. Quite a few of the female interviewees countering those negative emotions with the recognition of the potential for personal growth.

The previous chapter focused on lost possessions, including property, livestock, domestic pets, memories and also touched on the impact of the loss of future plans. The disrupted life

trajectory, where it is assumed that life will progress in a linear fashion, was mentioned by a significant number of participants:

I haven't worked since about the May after the fires. I don't believe I'll ever go back to the sort of work that I used to do, which was managing probably 90 to 120 people, because I can't get that focus. (Graham)

Graham said he is:

Still seeing a psychologist about [every] two or three weeks. I've just turned 60. I didn't plan on retiring until I was probably closer to 70, but I've probably retired now.

Sandra remarked on her age group and the ongoing repercussions of the disaster:

So it did set us back and I think a lot of other people were the same around our age group. It set them all back even when they were just on the small properties.

Malcolm: Mm.

Sandra: ...they were saying the same thing, 'We were going to retire too, but we can't now'.

Elyse, had been undertaking a post-graduate degree when made homeless by the Black Saturday fires. The day before our interview she had been informed that there would be a 'Fail' next to subjects she was unable to complete because of this trauma. This was yet another setback for her from a bureaucracy which appeared to lack compassion:

I had a big plan that would get the rest of my life moving, but you know, at the moment it's fallen through, and the more that happens, the less likely I will be to go back.

Her interview was infused with frustration and the thread of her narrative will feature prominently in the next chapter.

Paul mentioned his age when he spoke about the lack of choice and having to, 'try and start a whole new lot of memories, ... in your mid 40's it's not really part of the plan'. Living on one income he said:

Having to rebuild and things has sort of added costs and pressures to middle age that we wouldn't have ordinarily been planning on, so there's been a bit of stuff making things a bit tricky.

In contrast, his older neighbours were:

Lucky enough to be financial enough to go in and buy a nice place in town, and move on pretty well. I think probably in some ways the advantage of being older is ... financially you're a little bit more settled.

That observation rings true across the Gippsland participants provided they had current and adequate insurance.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how participants adjusted, or struggled to adjust, to post-bushfire life in the Latrobe Valley. All 33 participants either lived in or were displaced from an unrecognisable landscape. Both scenarios – displacement and non-displacement – were challenging. The disrupted relationship between people and place, and the sometimes-complicated decision-making around whether to remain and rebuild or relocate was an important finding of this chapter. For several participants who were rendered homeless, the major decision about where to live in the long term caused tension in their marriage; there was both unity and division.

The stressful situation of being displaced or questioning where home is can be compounded by the challenges that continue to occur through the course of everyday life. It is important to acknowledge that the desire to relocate is not restricted to the displaced. This chapter emphasised the difficulties faced by those who remained living in their damaged or intact home (in an unfamiliar landscape) and how the observed architectural changes and the disruption of mass construction shaped and or reshaped their feelings about home and place.

Many of the interviewees noted the absence of official acknowledgement about the circumstances that were faced by those who were not displaced. This created some division – felt deeply by some and less or not at all by others – within the fire-affected region. This is a significant theme for exploration in the next chapter, which focuses primarily on ‘recovery’ from both official and informal perspectives.

Of the three findings chapters this one has mirrored, to the greatest degree, the messiness of post-bushfire life. Whilst the Gippsland narratives are rich in content, often major and minor themes are entwined (across timeframes) and it is pointless to attempt separating them into distinct categories.

The levels of stress pre-fire, the life stage of each fire-affected interviewee and their socio economic circumstance (well insured, under insured or no insurance) were pivotal in the re-establishment of ‘normality’ in the wake of Black Saturday.

Chapter Seven

“Give yourself time”

Bushfire, or any other disaster, has the potential to unite or divide a family, neighbourhood or community. Thousands of people were impacted by Black Saturday; the unifying potential of the disaster was palpable. This chapter taps into the Gippsland narratives in order to understand how fire affected Latrobe Valley residents felt about the Victorian State Government’s immediate response to the crisis and their official recovery program.

The case management system that was introduced by the State Government generated praise and criticism amongst the interviewees. This chapter explores how the fire-affected participants responded to that groundbreaking initiative. It will also delve into the different experiences of recovery across the displaced. Those who were rendered homeless by bushfire and those non-displaced who were able to remain living in the charred landscape. The relationship between the fire affected interviewees and the official recovery response is at the core of this chapter.

Consideration will be given to the lack of recognition and support extended to adults living at home with their parents. In several instances the opportunity to voice their opinion was a major motivating factor for fire-affected residents to participate in this study. Some participants wanted to share their experiences in order to forewarn future fire-affected people about the pitfalls that they had faced in the aftermath.

A significant number of the Gippsland interviewees found healing through informal, frequently creative, outlets. The challenge, psychologically and emotionally, of seeking help – often for the first time – is also touched on in this chapter. It is important to learn from the recipients of disaster assistance. Some of the participants were, at the time of our interview, in a position to reflect back on their decisions and what they had achieved at a personal, neighbourhood and community level since Black Saturday.

Immediate response

The Victorian Government did not declare a State of Emergency in the aftermath of Black Saturday.³² That decision had medium and long-term implications for several of the participants

³² A State of Emergency was declared on Ash Wednesday. On 16 February 1983, ‘in Victoria, 47 people died, while in South Australia there were 28 deaths. This included 14 and 3 CFS volunteer fire-fighters who died across both states that day’, 2,545 individuals and families lost their homes.

and their immediate families. Three generations of Kate's family rented a house in Traralgon during the rebuilding process. She made a point of raising the ongoing health problems that her husband has encountered:

I think if there had of been a State of Disaster or Emergency called, things might have been different but my husband had his medication in the house and of course we couldn't get it, and he had a heart problem that he had medication for. It wasn't too bad before the fires, but missing a few doses and then with the stress of everything that had happened, his heart went into the wrong rhythm. And the night of the fires, about 1:30 in the morning, we realised he didn't have his medication. His heart was okay at this stage so we went off to the hospital and they didn't have that medication in Casualty and they said, 'Look you'll have to come back in the morning because the pharmacy's closed,' and I think, if there had of been a State of Emergency declared you would hope that there might have been a pharmacy open that he could have accessed... But it turned out he couldn't get in until the next day to get it, and by then he had missed a few doses plus the stress, the Sunday night his heart went into the wrong rhythm so he was back in hospital and they put him on Warfarin, and then...he had a really bad bleed behind his eye from the Warfarin, so they had to put him back in hospital and they gave him a drug to counteract the effects of the Warfarin to stop the eye-bleed, and he reacted to that, so it was just this series of events.

M: That's terrible.

Kate: Yeah, and they're the hidden things that people wouldn't think of.

As a direct result of not being able to access his medication Kate's husband had extended periods of time off work and his physical health has never been the same.

Kate: When I look back, he probably had all up maybe three months off...A lot of men have struggled with work, and I think that's one way that their issues are coming out. It's through work, but they are struggling and I've heard a lot of them say that.

Another interviewee's husband was hospitalised the day after Black Saturday. Once he was released he wasn't allowed to return home, "because it was a crime scene and all of that sort of stuff so we were blocked off here for five days". His tablets for a condition, "were in the cupboard", and he had to return to the Emergency Department at the local hospital (Carmen).

Wendy, who had a role in the local recovery effort, said that, 'some people missed out on their medications because the house burnt down and they didn't have it for days...and then there are all those long term consequences'. She, along with several other interviewees, noted the absence of a welfare check:

Like here, they [the Army] came and their job was to retrieve bodies, but they weren't knocking on doors and making sure that people in the homes were okay...and that's really devastating and...it wouldn't hurt if the guy that was patrolling their property came and knocked on the door and I'm sure those Army guys wanted to do that, but they weren't allowed to, it wasn't in their brief, they weren't allowed to do it.

What came through strongly in the interviews were the gaps between what people said they wanted and needed – human contact in the immediate aftermath – and the absence of that.

Interviewees were critical of the absence of official concern for their welfare or any personal enquiry about their wellbeing in the days following the bushfire:

Well, the supporters – if I can call them that – the people providing support in this fire, focused on Traralgon South. So if you went down to Traralgon South and cried poor, or said, ‘Look, I haven’t got this, I haven’t that, I haven’t got everything else’, then they would look after you. But not many people would come out here and say, ‘Okay, what needs to be done out here? How are you travelling?’ That just didn’t happen.

And nobody knocked on our door, and said, ‘Guys, how are you going, how are you coping?’
(Kristina)

For those who stayed and defended the trauma of surviving the bushfire was exacerbated by the length of time that the fire-affected area was cordoned off due to fatalities. Four families were separated. Graham, who sent his wife away on the day of the crisis, said ‘she feels it was worse for her being shut away from us for those three days’. Those that stayed were unable to leave and obtain supplies. Those who left were unable to return, although some managed to find a way in.

Karen commented that the initial calm, when only residents could gain access to the fire affected area, was broken when:

They let the public through which was probably a couple of weeks later, it was like a main freeway, it was just amazing on weekends, it was just so many cars.

M: Were they people from town or...?

Karen: I have no idea. They would just go past and they would just go slow. The worst was them taking photos. That’s one thing I didn’t like, and I’m thinking, ‘Excuse me. I don’t like you taking photos’, ...so I got some screens.

Carmen said her husband remained at their home without any utilities or essential services:

Because he wanted to stay here and I was worried sick about him staying here knowing he wasn’t well. Because you see, there was looters and stuff going around. People driving up your driveway and you didn’t know who they were. A busy body or steal whatever they could. Yeah, we had occasions where people started driving up and when they saw you they would stop.

Participants often stated that the disaster brought out the best and the worst in people.

I went around and collected all the fence posts. Pulled them out of the ground and put them in a heap up here. I was going to use them for firewood, and some bastard stole them. So you couldn’t leave anything ... there was thieves out, you could not leave anything unlocked or sitting on the ground for the first 12 months. (Pete)

Case management

Some of the Gippsland participants spoke about their experience of the case management approach, which was introduced for the first time by the Victorian State Government, in the aftermath of Black Saturday. The primary role of the case manager was to raise awareness of

eligibility requirements for financial assistance and advocate for funding or resources. The case managers also helped their clients with the administration associated with rebuilding and made referrals to other support services. There were mixed feelings, amongst the interviewees, about the usefulness of the case managers. The time-lag in being assigned a case manager and the lack of continuity was a common criticism.

Kate, who rebuilt on the family's block in Traralgon South, said:

I had four different case workers in the end, because they had to leave to go back to their regular jobs, so that was a little bit difficult in a way...I thought the case workers were great, but I think if it happened again, if they could get in there earlier, it would be a lot better because they could help you work through a lot of the paperwork and stuff that's there early on.

M: So you had four? Why were there...?

Kate: It was just that one left to do another job; one went back to her previous job. They just all had reasons and ... once we moved back in here [rebuilt home], and the lady was leaving, and I said, 'I'm okay now'. It was just help to get through, there were just mounds...I had a whole drawer of paperwork and red tape and things to fill out and grants, and I'm really glad that to start with they would just ask you questions and fill it out for you because there was no way I could have done it. I've no idea what I signed...it's too much.

Kristina spoke briefly about her experience of case management:

Case management was late. We got it, I think in April or May, after the fires. Yeah it was very frustrating, but then nevertheless.

An older couple, whose Callignee property was destroyed, echoed the lack of continuity:

M: And you had a case manager?

Irena: We've had some.

Leon: We had three.

Irena: The first lady she was lovely.

Leon: She was good, yeah.

Irena: And then we had another one, and then we had a third one.'

Leon: Yeah.

Paul, who was homeless as a result of Black Saturday, felt grateful for the help but frustrated by the fleeting nature of it:

We had three different case managers, two of which were absolutely more messed-up than we were, for whatever reasons, and then the last one was really good. But he felt fairly quickly that we were handling ourselves, so he moved on to other people. So we've sort of done everything on our own.

Cass, who had moved to Traralgon with her family, after their Callignee home was destroyed, decided she needed a case manager after finding it difficult to access information:

I wasn't going to have a case manager at all. We just wanted to deal with everything by ourselves, but because we were in town and we weren't out there we were missing out on everything. We weren't getting any of the Traralgon South thing, it was open at this time and that time, and we weren't getting any help there at the start. Anything that came through (from) the government was all going to our address out there, well you know, I mean when your internet's gone, when your phone's gone, everything's gone, well how can you...and nobody else was passing any information on.

M: So you were in a bit of a communication black hole?

Cass: We were in a black hole, yeah exactly. So then we decided, because everybody was saying, 'Well, have you got this? ... You know we've gone and got this thing, and we've got this bit of grant to help us get our winter clothes and things like that'. 'No, know nothing about that one. Haven't heard anything about that'. So then we decided, 'That's it'. We'd had enough.

There were differences in the experiences of those who were rendered homeless by the bushfire and those who were not. Several of the interviewees who were not made homeless felt the scale of their loss. In the most extreme cases all but the home was destroyed, including tractors, sheds, machinery, livestock, fencing, hay and the costs incurred, warranted a case manager. Karen, whose husband was reluctant to remain living in their intact home, said:

One of the worst and the hardest things for us was, [the waiting for a case manager]. We finally got a case manager...luckily through one of our other people who were in the thing [system]. We were told about this case manager and they asked her, 'Would she take us on?' Because we had been on the waiting list for five weeks and still no case manager and she took us on, and she was a dynamo. Teresa was her name and she was a real go-getter, she was unbelievable, a little bit on the pushy side, 'You must do this, and you must do this, and you must do this', and we're like, 'But, you know', and I think a bit of guilt because we had a house.

She was fortunate to access a caseworker who was already assisting someone that she knew. There were inconsistencies across the narratives around the accessibility of case management. Participants were unclear about eligibility and how long the case management support would be provided. How many fire-affected people – homeless or not homeless – would have benefited from being assigned a caseworker, but were not allocated one?

Pete, who lost his home, possessions, goats and marriage, was full of praise and felt it should be rolled-out elsewhere and not limited to environmental disasters:

Pete: The case managers we had were absolutely terrific. We would be lost without them in most cases, and I would like to see that carried on through every disaster or whatever, even, as I said, just a single house burning down, have a case manager for the poor people... by having somebody here, and saying, 'Right. This is what you've got to do. Fill this in, fill this in'. Things were simplified, whereas if we had to do it all ourselves, don't get me wrong, we had to do a hell of a lot ourselves, you know, you were running into town every day. That's one thing I would like to see carried on.

M: So the case management was really well done?

Pete: Yeah. It would have been nice with the same one.

Falling through the gaps

Two of the younger participants felt marginalised and neglected by the official recovery response because they were not home owners. The by-product of their invisibility, in the eyes of the official recovery program, was their withdrawal from the community. They felt that their parents (the home owners) were perceived as legitimate recipients of assistance and that they didn't fit into the prescribed measure of loss or need.

Adam, the older of the two, said:

I guess that's an age thing too. There wasn't really anything. Like my age group, there's not really a lot of farmers and there's not a lot of young farmers around, so you kind of don't fit any slot. I think too, it all, sort of, got caught a bit on the fly, and it sort of evolved as they went. There wasn't sort of a matrix setup of how to deal with it, which I ... always thought there would have been a matrix of saying, 'Right, you're this, this, this and this. This is what sort of funding you'll be eligible for', but that sort of all got made up as they went.

M: And you think the focus was quite heavily on those that lost their homes?

Adam: Yeah, definitely.

M: And does that create a division at all, because I get a sense that...?

Adam: Yeah, it does. Well people will sort of say, 'Well your house survived, so you're not affected', and I had a lady from the Council when I was trying to get a case worker.

M: Did you end up getting one?

Adam: Yeah, Mum and Dad ended up getting one, and I got lumped in with their caseworker.

M: Even though you would have been 29?

Adam: Yeah, but because I was living in their house, that was what created this grey area, and because my blocks [land] didn't have houses on them, it was sort of, 'Well you don't need one. And I rang, because they didn't have enough case workers, which I can understand, and they always said, 'Ring back in a week's time,' and I rang back, and the lady on the end of the phone said, 'Well not everyone who lost their house has got one yet, so you'll just have to wait,' and, 'Really?' So I got a little bit cranky about that. And so after that I decided, 'Well righto, just keep to yourself,' and so when they started the Hub up at Traralgon South I never really went down to that...I've said on a number of occasions, next time I'll probably light the house and make sure it burns. Yeah, I just feel that...if your house burnt down, everything was a lot easier than if it didn't.

His last comment – about next time letting the house burn – is consistent with the overall view of participants (displaced and non-displaced) who articulated that those who successfully stayed and defended their home were overlooked by the official recovery effort. The presence of a home on a fire-affected property implied that the residents were not fire affected or did not suffer loss that warranted assistance on a par with the displaced. This simplistic measure reinforced any division that did or did not exist before the recovery program commenced.

The other young interviewee Elyse, echoed Adam's experience of 'not fitting neatly into any category'. Her insight into the lack of recognition afforded to non-home owners is interesting and useful from a policy perspective:

Elyse: I don't really do much of that sort of stuff [attend local events]. I don't do any of it now, because there's been so much talk of, 'You didn't suffer enough. You didn't go through enough. You don't deserve this stuff'. So I just don't because I can't do it anymore, I can't have people tell me what I did or didn't do or feel, and what I do or don't deserve.

M: But do they say that publicly or how do you know that's what they...?

Elyse: They say it to your face.

M: Really?

Elyse: But they don't mean it. Like they don't mean to be, they're not doing it to be nasty.

M: Yeah, but it sounds nasty.

Elyse: It does. It feels it.

M: It's almost as if people have a rating, or a hierarchy system of suffering or trauma.

Elyse: Yeah, absolutely. And they don't know my story.

M: So how can they assume, make the assumption?

Elyse: They just do. And, because I fall into the gaps, because I don't own my own house, I'm not living on my own, owning a house, and I'm not a kid...So it gets tricky. People judge a lot. And need to feel important in their administrative roles, you know, and I'm not sure that they realise.

M: So was that a key barrier in not getting involved, but just being able to access things that you were eligible for?

Elyse: For me, yeah, I had to keep validating the reasons and trying to convince, and I'm not that kind of person anyway, and having social interactions is often hard for me. So that was, it became harder and harder and harder, but you know, other people would just go in and be given everything.

M: And didn't have to kind of justify or explain?

Elyse: Yeah, nothing, and I would be justifying and still be told no, so it was, so I don't do it, I don't try. And the more lines they draw, and the more boxes they put you out of, the less inclined you are to want to try and be part of something. You know, I'm 28; I don't want to be going away on trips with 18 year olds. I'm not a kid.

M: So have they actually excluded a certain age group, either by default or just by neglect?

Elyse: It's not meant, none of its meant. And really all they're trying to do is help, but there's lots of people who fall through the gaps and there's a group of people who seem to fall through almost every gap.

Other insights about the welfare of adult children were acquired indirectly. Kate expressed concern for the mental health of her adult son who was a volunteer fire fighter on Black Saturday:

And our son is still seeing someone [counsellor], but that's just very therapeutic for him. I mean it's so different for the people that actually fought the fires, because they have had calls from people they couldn't get to that they knew, and you know, it's. And like his house burnt down. Like, ours burnt down while he's fighting the fires.

Teenagers and young children

Carmen emphasised that 'for the kids it's really hard.' One of her daughters was aged 15 at the time, and she 'was really quite depressed' and 'had a chance to go on a great bushfire recovery project'. Her daughter and a friend 'went on one of the big Tall Ships like the Young Endeavour but this one was called the 'One and All'...and they sailed from Melbourne to Adelaide ...and that changed her life. That really picked her spirits up a bit'.

The impact of the severe bushfire and its aftermath on young children and teenagers was gleaned from the interviews with parents. Two participants were parents and teachers; they were aware of the impact on children who were attending school. Claire said:

We have one child who lost his father and we had lots of counselling for the kids who had lost their house. Once again, I actually think a lot of the children who stayed and defended were probably more traumatised than those who had lost their houses. I mean obviously it's traumatic to lose your, but I tell you, there were certainly a lot of traumatised children, you know the ones who were huddled under a blanket with the parents saying, 'We're going to die'.

Lisa, who with her husband, decided to rebuild the house (at the time of the interview) was listed for sale, flagged the unknown long-term side effects for their daughter:

And that's the problem, there's a big, big, big question mark. I think age has a lot to do with it, and whether or not you've got a young family. Like really little kids, well they don't know any different because they're not going to remember any of it. In a couple of years it's not even going to register. But for us with our daughter, she was five, and most of us can remember incidents when we were five, so you've got that memory, and that's the part that worried us the whole time. How much this was going to affect her later on in life...that's why we had her in counselling for two years. So I would say that, you know, we could try and make it as easy for her to adjust as possible.

She raised an interesting issue related to the constant replacement of items and the saturation of donations for people who had lost their home and possessions:

Lisa: Because she's watched us spend money after money, after money, for 18 months, and she thinks there's just money falling out of trees all the time. [She says] 'It doesn't matter you can just go to the shops and buy a new one. It doesn't matter, you can just go to the shops and get me a new one'.

M: I haven't heard that before.

Lisa: Yeah. It's created problems, and it's like all the donations ... are wonderful, but be careful, because it creates other problems, especially in the younger children. Like the older children know what it's for, but those little ones, they just see all this stuff going at them.

Lisa said her daughter gets distressed on days when the conditions are similar to Black Saturday or on the occasions when there have been other bushfires in the area:

The one hot windy day we did have this summer, she freaked out. She got really upset, really distressed and she wouldn't settle until she rang her Dad at work, and then she settled down. But then the next day we had smoke from the fire up at Bairnsdale, and it took me three hours to convince her that it was at Bairnsdale. Using the radio, the television and the bloody Internet, before I could convince her it wasn't here.

Reuben, a father of three children, who were aged two, four and six years on Black Saturday, said:

The two littlest ones, it was no big drama, but [the eldest] was certainly impacted by the fires...even now, you talk about the fire and you know... things will come up from time to time and you think, 'Yeah, that's related to the fire'...[the oldest] is old enough now that she can listen to the radio and understand the warnings and stuff, so she becomes quite anxious on those [fire risk] days.

Hanna expressed relief that her children were very young at the time of the crisis:

I think having the kids, although it was hard rebuilding and all that stuff with them, they were young enough not to know what had really gone on. Like [their daughter] knows that the house had burnt down, and even now she's sort of – she's funny, she'll say – like she'll lose something and she'll go, 'Maybe it was burnt in the fires,' and 'No honey, we bought that after that'. So she knows what was going on, ...we had had her first birthday party here, the week before the fires, the weekend before the fires. So it hasn't really affected her in the way that, it's just something that happened and yeah, that's it.

Division and tension

In a significant number of interviews, division is a major theme, whilst in fewer interviews it is not mentioned or only mentioned briefly. The division was often multi-layered. Across the interviews there was talk of division between those who were displaced and those that weren't; between Traralgon South and other fire-affected townships; farming and non-farming families; between the Latrobe Valley and Marysville/Kinglake; between those that left and those that stayed to defend their property. The way money was allocated and what it was used for caused some tension.

How the fire-affected residents were assessed and their losses and inconveniences measured, sometimes influenced how people felt towards others and the recovery effort in general:

On the phone we got [the question] all the time from these agencies, 'Did you lose your house?' is the first thing. I hardly talked. [Her husband] talked to them all the time. He refused to call anymore because the first question they asked is, 'Did you lose your house?' 'No'.

We got told by a caseworker, 'You ring this number. You ring this number for this grant. You ring this number for this grant'. 'No, we can't help you'. People like [her neighbour] who stayed and defended and saved insurance companies millions of dollars got diddly-squat, got nothing. We actually got a little bit of money because we were not allowed to come home and we stayed because of no power and all that. As I said we had to buy the generator because we were told it was going to be a month. And I said, 'I'm not staying away from home for a month', but before then we stayed

away for a week, because we were out of home for a week. We had an allowance, like a grant, because we were not able to get home for a week. People like [her neighbour], who saved the insurance companies so much money, were not eligible for anything. They went through so much and risked so much, and as I said, saved so much. I mean their choice, but when you think that you could help them out, you know. (Karen)

Claire, who volunteered in the local recovery effort, said that initially she believed the crisis:

Did bring us all together and it was that family-feel and everything like that...but money is a very powerful device and I know that currently...there are people thinking that Traralgon South, in itself, the township, which suffered very little, is getting all the money and the infrastructure.

Many interviewees mentioned the benefits reaped by Traralgon South. When speaking about the relief centre set-up in that township Pete said:

It was a good set-up; it wasn't too bad at all. A lot of people were angry because a lot of money was spent on Traralgon South, whereas, they never got anything, nothing was burnt. But me, I couldn't give a damn, but yeah, there's a lot of animosity towards Traralgon South now.

Graham, who defended his property with his adult son, was critical of the recovery effort, feeling that it was very town focused and benefited those who fled their properties rather than those who stayed to defend. The 'newer people' who have moved to the region in the 'last 10 years, maybe 15 years' have:

Established networks since the fire and became spokespeople for the district because some of them didn't lose their homes and others just sort of said, 'Well, we'll just have to make the best of it'. But they didn't get back out and talk to other members and other people in the district. They just formed a district, and it was based on their own opinion, and they were the ones that had sat inside their house watching telly as the fire approached and then got out, or had got out in the first place and said, 'Well, that's it, I'm out of here anyway'. [They], had no intention of remaining to preserve the district or anything.

This alludes to division across the community regarding decision-making capacity and access to funding; power and who has or hasn't got it. Displaced and non-displaced interviewees raised the issue of the lack of consultation with fire-affected residents.

Kristina spoke about feeling less connected to the township of Traralgon South. The geographic distance, between the recovery-base and where she lived was minimal and yet the feeling of dislocation for Kristina, was substantial.

And that was my process after I came back in...everything was on the inside. August last year, my feeling came like, 'Hey, what's happening in this district? Is it all going right?' And we haven't had any recognition of this little [housing estate] nobody mentioned the name. We've been classed as Traralgon South, and that's the township a bit further away and...they got all the donations and they're building all these beautiful things, so that's a frustration. If you want to rebuild, money is a big step.

Jude, who became homeless on Black Saturday, was exasperated at the way money, which had been donated by the Australian public in the wake of the disaster, was spent:

Everyone was under-insured and there wasn't enough money to, and I mean so much money has been spent on (sigh)... a lot of money was spent on warm fuzzy things... You know, 'Come along to an evening and bring your friends', and it's a free meal and then someone gets up and talks about grief at the time of a fire, and you know, you think, 'How many thousand did this cost for the three-course-meal and a motel?' ...I didn't see as being, well, quite a lot of people got a bit upset about it because this woman was talking about...she was giving examples of people in grief, not necessarily in bushfires, but in coping with grief or some such thing, but it just didn't seem to, but there's things that people don't realise financially how difficult it is, and you know there's all this money that hasn't been given out, and yet when the fires happened, people were donating money to help people rebuild their lives, and I think, no one's brave enough to say anything because it sounds as if you're really selfish.

Sandra was angry about the decisions related to the allocation of grants and money and was incredulous about what was possible in the name of 'recovery':

Well we've been onto one of them, and it was out to dinner and I talked a couple of people into going with me and we went in there and we had dinner, and then they were saying that they had money and people wanted to form little clubs and groups and things, and they would fund them... One lady said, 'I might form a wine group. Would you pay for us to go down to Melbourne to sample the wine', she said, 'Yes', and I thought, 'That is ridiculous'. Apparently the woman was only joking, but that was enough for me, we all just got up and went home, and we've never gone since. We thought, 'That's just ridiculous, that's just wasting money'. To us it was you know...maybe it helps people. Some people I don't know, but it didn't do anything for us, so we just went home, so we didn't go to anything else with them. That was that. We tried it, we've done it, it's not working, we're not going.

Jackie, who worked with her husband to successfully defend their property on Black Saturday, expressed frustration with how they, and all those in similar circumstances, were overlooked by the official recovery effort:

Because we didn't lose our home we weren't so much involved in all ...the care taking of people. The care packaging and the trips away to spas and all these things that were all going on, because you know, we were looked upon as, 'They're alright, they've got their house'... And that happened. Where we didn't always get that invitation or that opportunity, but I would love to speak to people in Marysville...because I haven't, I haven't had that opportunity to go and speak to those people, because, 'We're alright!' [laughter]

Her laughter was incredulous, having lived through the trauma of a catastrophic bushfire that destroyed several homes in their street and many in their neighbourhood, the unspoken assumption that they're 'alright' was provocative and unwelcome. The lack of acknowledgement of those whose home was not burnt-out (whilst the owners were present and in survival-mode) was a point raised by other interviewees, displaced and non-displaced.

People who stayed, really, they're the ones I feel for, you know, they seem to be the ones who are, and in lots of cases quite traumatised as well. (Claire)

They've been fighting for their property, but they've seen all the horror around them and I haven't seen really, anything...the before and after. They were in the middle of it, so that's a big process. And they worked all so hard, to clean up the gardens that were burned and to clean the house that was all dirty because of the fire, and then they lived in this eerie area with no lights, no sound. It must have been horrible. (Kristina)

Elyse, who 'fell through the recovery gaps', was upset by her experience at an official recovery event:

Elyse: I went with Mum, we went on like a women's retreat that was organised by VBRRA [Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction & Recovery Authority], and Dad went on a men's fishing thing, and both places we got asked, what area we were from, and we told them, and bushfire people had no idea.

M: Really? The people working in recovery?

Elyse: No. Well yeah, and the people...

M: Other people affected?

Elyse: Yeah. From the northern areas, had, [said] 'Why? Why are you here? When was that fire?' Same day. We lost people too. Our whole entire community was destroyed. So that's been pretty hard.

M: That's confronting isn't it?

Elyse: Well you don't want to be there, you don't want to be part of something that's supposed to help you heal, because it makes it worse. And the response is just a, 'What?' rather than a straight away, 'I'm really sorry, we weren't aware. How do we fix this? Just as a straight sort of, the opposite, so...

This represents a hierarchy of response within the many fire-affected locations in Victoria. The Latrobe Valley, from this interviewee's experience with the recovery effort, was off the radar. This lack of awareness had a negative outcome for her healing and her opinion of, and attitude towards, the official recovery programs.

Four interviewees, who were rendered homeless and rebuilt on their burnt out property, referred to the responses of others (sometimes those whose home remained intact or 'outsiders'):

Like someone said to me, 'I really envy you because you've got a new house', and I said, 'Yes we've got a new house and we're very blessed, but you've got all your things in your house. You might have an older home but you've got your things and your treasures and everything'. So I said, 'We can both look at it and think we're victims, or we can look at it and realise just how much we have'. (Kate)

Hanna, who reluctantly rented with her young family in Morwell during much of the rebuilding, stated:

And lots of people have sort of said, and they've come to the house and stuff, and they go, 'You've got such a good house now, and blah, blah, blah', and it's like, 'Yeah, it is good and we have got a better house, but it's been two whole lost years where it's...'

M: It's hard work, not to mention all the stress.

Hanna: Yeah, it has been hard, but it's, I don't know. Like we still are in a better position financially with the bigger house and all that sort of stuff, but yeah, I don't think I would, like if I had the choice I would rather not.

Lisa was less diplomatic:

I said, 'Aren't we lucky we lost two years of our life. Try that for size. Try coming home one day and imagine driving home one day, and your house isn't there. Everything you own is gone, and see how you cope'.

Kristina touched on an issue that wasn't mentioned by any other participants that of suppressing emotions and softening body language to protect other fire-affected people. She was upset about the scale of loss, but keen to rebuild:

Yeah, and we said, 'Well, we're going to rebuild', and we were very strong, and yeah, then you get excited... You know, it's sometimes hard for your surroundings, but people don't always understand that process. Sometimes it's very hard, because I was excited and I couldn't say everything, because I knew everybody was reacting and responding different.

She was the only one who embraced her new (rebuilt) home, with gusto, which she designed as a form of therapy in the immediate aftermath. Midway through the interview Kristina said:

We had negative reactions as well of course, with people, and then we think – well, with jealousy – I don't know, but it's something I can't carry.

Some of her resilience is linked to her identity as a migrant, and to her personality. In advance of Black Saturday her family had made the decision to sell the house and move on. They were psychologically prepared to vacate their home. Additionally, their level of insurance may have influenced her capacity and willingness to embrace the unanticipated experience of designing, building and furnishing a new home.

Carmen, whose Koornalla home was damaged, referred to the tactlessness of non-fire-affected people:

The thing is...what I find now is...you just talk to people who have been through the same as you because other people fob it off, or even people in town fob it off. And one really good friend in Melbourne who rang me at one stage and said, 'Well, just get over it', basically.

Accepting help

Some participants who became homeless spoke about the difficulty of accepting donations.

Kristina, who embraced her new home, said:

It's hard though, to go forward and to accept offers, like if people want to give you help: because, it's easier in life to give than to accept. I had to go to the Red Cross to get a pair of socks.

M: What did it feel like to be...?

Kristina: Terrible, because you don't dare to ask, and the lady who sat on the other side of the table, she asked me all these questions and, 'Have you got this?' 'No'. 'Have you got that?' 'No', and then she said, because she knew my personality, I wouldn't ask...she said, 'You sit there, I'm back in five minutes', and she came back with two plastic bags with towels, toothbrush, comb, all that sort of...toiletry. And yeah, that was very hard. And then, they bring you to all the clothes and you, that's awful, yeah.

Kate shared an anecdote about her neighbour:

It was very difficult. And even one of our neighbours said that someone offered him something, he said, 'I don't need that. I can go to the bank and get money out', and then he got thinking and he thought, 'People have donated this, and it might have cost them to donate it, and I'm throwing it back in their faces', and he said that's when I decided I would accept things. And I would rather give than get, but you just have to swallow your pride, I guess, and realise that people have given out of the goodness of their hearts, and you have to eat, and you've got to have something to wear.

Wendy reinforced that initially it was common to have the donated essential goods declined:

People would say, 'I'm OK, but please take it to my neighbour because they will need it more'. [She had to] physically just leave it, turn around and walk off.

Cass, who reluctantly lives in Traralgon with her family whilst still retaining ownership of their land in Callignee, said by the time they had decided to seek out a caseworker:

There was a new batch of them, and it was hard approaching them, if that's what you mean, because as I said, we've always been very private people, and then yeah, to have to even ask for anything, or ask for help, you know, that's been the hardest thing, is asking for help.

M: And accepting donations or...?

Cass: Exactly. A lot of the stuff, when we've gone to the centres, even the Salvos and things, it's hard to accept it because we've never ever, we've always battled on, you know. I wouldn't take anything extra. [They said] 'You'll need this for next week'. I said, 'If I want it next week, I'll come and get it, but at the moment I only need this'.

There were a lot of people worse off than us, and we considered ourselves lucky and we were together... And then you see some people were not very nice, put it like this, and didn't lose anything and yet were grabbing everything that they could, and that was hard to see as well. Here's us with nothing and yet we're not taking anything, and here's them with everything still and they're grabbing whatever they can.

Some people refused or did not seek out the help that was available to them. Lisa, who had rebuilt and then had her new house advertised for sale, referred to her father who stayed on his property with his son (her brother) and actively defended on Black Saturday, 'they nearly died'. Of the grants available she said, 'I know my dad never applied for a cent, just wouldn't do it'. They discovered later that his house was insured for what it had cost to buy: \$25, 000. When speaking of her family Lisa reported that the biggest change was with her brother; he would not talk about the fires for 20 months:

You even mention a fire and he would get up and walk out of the room. It took him a long time, and actually yeah, it took him that long to come back here.’

M: Really? Where does he live?

Lisa: Kilmany. He saw it from his place. He’s got a big farm there.

M: So you mean he didn’t come back to visit? Just stayed away?

Lisa: Yeah, just stayed away.

Feedback

Some of the Gippsland interviewees offered reflections on their experience of the recovery effort and, more generally, the task of rebuilding and re-establishing their lives. A powerful piece of advice, emphasised by several of the displaced participants, was about the timing of major life decisions post-bushfire. Some of these reflections were laced with regret.

Robyn, who was living in a converted shed whilst undergoing chemotherapy, articulated the strength that was needed to resist the desire and Government (State and Federal) endorsed push, to rebuild:

Just let it sink in first. Give yourself time. It would be months, easily. Just give yourself time to absorb it and to acknowledge anything that you are feeling, because if you’re feeling it, then it’s relevant, and if you don’t acknowledge it, it’s not going to go away, it’s not going to change. Things will change, outlook will change, the strength of the emotions will eventually change if you acknowledge what’s going on, but the main thing is, just to give time, and not to really rush too quickly into things.

It’s very nice to have the immediate support there; it was very good, and our area here, it was really good for that, they swung into action immediately. But yes, the time to actually just absorb before you make all those really, really big decisions, and to just take it in and go at your own pace, don’t be pushed into it.

Paul, who was a full-time carer to his 2-year-old son at the time of our interview, said:

This [new home], you don’t sort of feel like you’ve earned it, because it’s not what you worked for; given more time I probably would have done a lot differently.

Deeper into his narrative he said:

You’ve got to look at what you actually see your next 10 years as, which we didn’t. We just wanted to get back to, and we wanted to get back out to what we had before. We hadn’t adjusted to the fact that it was never going to be like it was before. None of us had experienced a bushfire before, even though we were coming out to the place and seeing the devastated area. Funnily enough, we were still planning to be back in it like it was before, even though a different house. But it still felt like it was going to be the same, but it’s not. It’s just not the same. There’s nothing the same about the place. So wait as long as you possibly can to make any of your decisions, think about what you want for the next 10 years, and what you expect for the next 10 years, because it has an impact. You commit financially to it. You commit emotionally to it. It’s hard to, part of this chopping and

changing is you put so much emotion into it and then it's not what you expected and so you think, 'Well would I be better to do this now?' So certainly wait...

Paul articulated the cruel surprise of moving into a new home and discovering that nothing is as it was. It was not an immediate sensation, but one that by stealth revealed itself; the pain of profound loss that doesn't diminish with time reared its head. He was not emotionally prepared for the permanence of his loss. The advice offered by the displaced interviewees was that time was the key component.

On a broader level and from the recovery perspective, Gordon, who was active in the local CFA brigade and whose home was on the fringe of the bushfire, noted the diversity of needs within the Latrobe Valley:

If you look at Traralgon South, that's almost a suburban atmosphere...but we have three groups and we tried to explain it in there [Melbourne]...The needs of Traralgon South, from the emergency perspective, are different from the needs of Koornalla, different to the needs of Red Hill Road and Loy Yang Park Estate, different to ten acre blocks, different to the farm open grazing 100 acre plus. So we've all got different needs.

So there's not a single one that fits it all, and that's what we tried to address in...[Melbourne], is we have commonality, but it's not a one size fits all,

In the aftermath of Black Saturday the universal approach to recovery applied was found to be too simplistic. Several participants noted that the recovery response was prescribed by public servants in Melbourne who were unfamiliar with, and removed from, their local community. That dislocation – between the official recovery effort and the local needs – was a point frequently raised.

Graham felt there was scope to provide opportunities for social engagement and community building across the fire-affected region:

I'm starting to think now, that the government would, if I can take fencing as an example, if the government had said, 'Okay, we've got this \$350 million or something, and we're going to put a significant proportion to helping people recover their infrastructure'. Provide the materials and then say, 'Okay, there you are, you've got your materials. Now, you need to work with your neighbour to erect fences, to put in water systems, to do whatever's necessary', and that would then get the community working together as it used to, rather than say, 'Okay, here's a contractor who will come in and put all the fences up'.

His son Adam, who fell through the official recovery gaps due to not being a home-owner, was assisted by volunteers:

I had some guys from Lindenow [East Gippsland] who were old farmers and they came down and helped me for the first 10 months, to basically get enough boundary fencing done that we could contain stock, and they were just the biggest help, and they weren't pushy, they would just ring up and say, 'Righto, we're coming down this weekend. Have you got something for us to do?' And you

go, 'Yeah, no worries'. 'Alright, cool', and they were pretty well self sufficient, and they worked outside all of the government stuff and the volunteer stuff, and they were really good.

The benefit to Adam, beyond the physical help to re-establish his fencing, was informally connecting with other disaster-affected men:

Adam: That's what I found so good with the guys who helped with the fencing from Lindenow. A lot of them had been through fires before or floods. They had had some sort of natural disaster that had wiped them out and that's why they were helping, because they knew what it was like, and they knew what you were trying to do. It was that kind of thing. I think for people in my situation, that's the sort of thing that you need.

M: Rather than someone who might come up from the city and not be able to relate at all on any level to what you've survived.

Adam: Yeah, and they understand your attachment to your cattle and things like that.

Essentially what the bushfire narratives reveal is that the recovery response was, in the main, homogenous and did not cater to the diversity of circumstances within the Latrobe Valley. The potential for meaningful community building was not capitalised on, certainly not within the constraints of the official response.

Informal recovery

People varied in how they coped and what they turned to in order to assist with their healing. For some it was simply talking with fire affected neighbours or volunteers that were assisting them with the reconstruction. Kate cited belief and faith in God as her primary support. She quoted the Bible at various points in our interview and felt that her belief helped her accept her new reality:

You know we're Christians, so I guess we see things in a different perspective... One or two days before the fires, I had been reading through a book in the Bible and one of the verses I had read was, 'The Lord gave, the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord'. And I thought, 'Yeah, that's true, our circumstances have changed but God hasn't'. And I think that's one thing we've clung to through it all; because he's promised that He's the same yesterday, today and forever, and there's nothing else on earth that we can own or have that claims that. In a split second everything that we owned had gone, but it makes you realise they're not the important things in life. I can see so much good that's come out of this. Not that I would want it to happen again, and especially for the people around here that have lost family, but there is so much good in the way the community's come together.

Carmen, whose Koornalla home was defended by her husband, sister and brother-in-law, spoke about the important role music had in her family's healing process.

In terms of [my husband] and his friends, well out of the [Strzelecki] Stringbusters, all that group, there was probably half of them impacted by the fire...do you know what I mean?

And so they were doing a lot of community, post the fire. They were playing music at a lot of community things. Like they do a lot of that anyway, but a lot of them had been through it

themselves, but they get together every Wednesday and practice over at Ray's shed at Yinnar. And they're a great bunch of blokes, and they call it a bit of a men's self help group.

Her husband travelled with a friend to North America, 'to Mississippi, New Orleans sort of area, Alabama, but they also went to Tennessee and Virginia and North Carolina, they hired a Winnebago and they had the time of their life'.

Other interviewees mentioned travel both domestic and international and the benefits of removing themselves from the altered (barren) landscape. Sometimes it offered a fresh perspective:

I was just looking at that photo up there on the wall that [my wife] bought in Manhattan, and we went down to Ground Zero on a three-hour tour of Manhattan, and that's when you start to realise, there's a lot worse things that happen to people than what's happened to me, and I mean I got very emotional. (Harley)

Pete, who had no form of insurance, became 'good friends' with the volunteers that travelled from Tasmania to assist fire-affected people: 'I've been down to Tassie to see all of them and they've been up here again, I'm going to Tassie again soon'. A couple, who travelled from Western Australia to the Latrobe Valley assisted Erik and Marilyn, who 'lived in town [Traralgon] for almost a year'. They helped 'build the shed', which Erik and Marilyn lived in for another year during the rebuilding. Erik marvelled at this couple, the husband was a builder and his wife was a psychologist, 'who went up into the hills to help people', every day for three months. They stayed in touch and Erik and Marilyn 'went over to the West [Australia] and helped them because they got flooded'.

Several women referred to the Stitch & Chat (craft) group that was formed three months after Black Saturday. Robyn, living in a shed at the time of the interview, spoke at length about the valuable social connection the group provided to her in difficult times:

When Bronwyn started...that was just amazing, it really was, and just to get down there every week, and you know, see a couple of faces that you knew and some that you didn't, and it was very supportive. We may not have talked very deeply at the time, but there was somewhere we could go, and we knew that there was always someone there feeling pretty much the same as what you were feeling, no matter what it was, whether it was good, bad or indifferent. There was someone going to be feeling, and it gave us a focus, I guess, once a week, definitely, we were going to be in this one spot doing something.

Yeah, and there's lots of times...I haven't even pretended, I didn't even bring my craft bag in. I was just coming for the chat; a cup of tea and a chat...and that's all it was, the craft was really a cover for the women to get together and support each other.

M: So is that a form of therapy, do you think?

Robyn: Yes, yeah, definitely.

Lorna, in her late sixties, felt supported by her local CWA branch:

I find talking to...the CWA women, the ones that have been through it, it's easier to talk to them and to know that you're not the only one that's going through it. Whereas if you talk to your own friends they say, 'Yes, I know how you must feel'. Well they haven't got a bloody clue, and that's putting it bluntly.

Karen, who experienced difficulty in her marriage because of her desire to stay in their intact home (conflicting with her husband's need to leave) said:

My therapy is to have good books and time to myself to read...the craft group and my garden. I love my garden I just adore it.

Paul, who articulated intense unsettledness, noted a few positives that he valued:

I think one of the downsides of before, given that everything was so private and isolated, was that, that's sort of how we lived our lives a bit. I think the opening-up of it has opened up all the neighbours to each other a lot more.

M: That's interesting.

Paul: I think, not only us...the ones who saved their stuff have been perhaps more inclined to communicate as well. I think everyone's opened up in the immediate community very well, really, really well.

M: So there's more connection there.

Paul: Yeah, definitely. And there's been a really concerted effort by some people to help.

M: Would that be the biggest positive do you think?

Paul: Yeah, 100 per cent, yeah.

Whilst he missed the privacy of the pre-bushfire landscape he could appreciate what the openness offered.

Life goes on

Some of the participants – whilst navigating the rebuilding or relocation process – had multiple stresses to contend with. Relationship breakdown and financial hardship have featured in the findings chapters and these were directly related to the bushfire. Difficulties and tensions were sometimes magnified by stressful events or ongoing challenges.

Life goes on after a crisis and stressful events continued to occur for many of the interviewees. These included, but were not limited to: post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); cancer diagnosis and treatment; premature retirement; estrangement from an immediate family member; extortion; emergency surgery; depression and anxiety (in adults and adult children); suicidal thoughts; chronic illness; and marriage, death and birth (of children/grand-children).

Kate, who was homeless, said that immediately after the bushfire her son and future daughter-in-law had to rearrange their wedding, due to the destruction of gardens, sheds and cars that were going to play a part in the ceremony:

Then [my daughter and son-in-law] and the family moved back from overseas, because I mean they had lost everything too, plus they were having a baby...They were in a third world country so they're not allowed to have their baby there, they have to come back. So they came back, and then my Dad passed away, and then two days later, [my grandson] was born, and then [my daughter and son-in-law] moved back overseas, so there was a lot of things happening.

An interviewee was swamped with stressful events prior to and following Black Saturday. In the year after her home was destroyed Jude's mother suffered a stroke and had to leave her home: 'I have to produce quite a lot of money for her to be in the hostel'. Years prior to the bushfire her husband was diagnosed with cancer. She also referred to her son's gambling problem and her grandson's leukaemia. She said, "So life is kind of...there have been many layers since the fires, but you know, those things happen anyway. Life's just like that isn't it?"

When asked whether relationships within his family had changed, Graham said there were complications in the weeks and months in advance of the bushfire that were 'a bit traumatic'. He said it was "impossible to separate it out". So "in terms of the Black Saturday effect on family relationships, there was a whole heap of other stuff going on".

These narratives provide a glimpse of the sometimes-unrelenting cascade of stress that can occur in the aftermath of a disaster. In conjunction with the challenges of re-establishing their lives (if they were displaced) and coming to terms with their loss and grief many participants had to cope with additional stresses either directly linked with, or in isolation to, Black Saturday.

Conclusion

Presenting the voices of the Gippsland interviewees was the primary purpose of the three findings chapters. Exploring the minor and major themes of the bushfire narratives has provided a deeper understanding of how individuals and families responded and coped in the aftermath of a catastrophic bushfire.

The first findings chapter, "All Their Treasures", considered the impact of the loss of personal possessions and animals on the fire-affected participants. The second findings chapter, "I Saw a Bird", delved into the disrupted relationship between people and place and the sometimes-complicated decision-making around whether to remain and rebuild or relocate. The ongoing feeling of unsettledness, for those who rebuilt or relocated, was an important issue.



Image 11: This photograph of the natural re-generation illustrates how the post-bushfire landscape looked when I was gathering my primary material for this research.

This third findings chapter, “Give Yourself Time”, documented the participants’ experience of the official recovery response, particularly case management, and what insights they wanted to pass on to future fire or disaster affected individuals, couples and families. Informal approaches to healing, which emerged through a significant number of the Gippsland narratives, were also reflected-on. Secondary trauma inflicted unintentionally by the official response and recovery program, was raised as an important issue, particularly for non-home owners and those who stayed to defend their home.

Overlooking the needs of those who stayed to defend their home generated frustration and/or anger. In several cases the lack of official acknowledgement contributed to or created division within the fire-affected community. To assume that there was greater need where there was greatest tangible loss was simplistic. This finding is important and requires more consideration: it will be discussed in the next chapter.

The difficulties of healing and restoration after a severe bushfire cannot be understated. Black Saturday united and divided (sometimes simultaneously) families and communities in the Latrobe Valley. The Gippsland narratives highlight that there is no clear correlation between the scale of loss and the experience of restoration and recovery.

The next chapter, the discussion, will be anchored by time. That is the only universal element beyond the disaster itself, which permeates the Gippsland interviews. Life cycle is the significant factor that intersects with many of the minor and major themes; this temporal element is almost ubiquitous (so obvious and yet subtle). Much of this thesis hinges on time; the temporal infuses every component.

Chapter Eight

Discussion: “Looking into the cracks more deeply”

Introduction

This research contributes to an understanding of place and the re-creation of a sense of self, in the post-disaster space. It explores the complicated ‘emotional work’ and the sometimes-difficult decision-making triggered by living in or being displaced from a post-bushfire landscape. As previously stated, the role of time and the distorted sensation of time after trauma permeates the entire study. The temporal is, with exception of the fire event itself, the lone universal component of this work. One of the common criticisms that emerged from the Gippsland narratives was the rigidity of the official response. Some participants resisted or resented being forced into, or excluded from, a post-bushfire category. It would be insincere and somewhat futile to attempt to reduce the key findings generated by this research into neat classifications, when the ‘black and white’ approach is known to cause hurt and contribute to division. Acknowledging the categories when they emerge and to “at least try and not to start from these” is, according to Miller (2008, p. 4), “perhaps the healthiest option”. Therefore, this chapter will strive to embrace the grey; identifying and delving deeply into the messy realities that unfolded, long after the media and public interest has waned, when everyday lives have been obliterated or ruptured by bushfire.

The primary purpose of this discussion is to gather and combine the essence of the preceding chapters in order to form an explanatory whole. This chapter is essentially, the sum of all the parts. As Bruner (1991, p. 8) asserts, within the context of the hermeneutic circle, a story can “only be ‘realized’ when its parts and whole can, as it were, be made to live together”. Bruner’s (1991, p. 6) central concern was not how narrative as text is constructed but “how it operates as an instrument of mind in the construction of reality”. The participants in this study shared their thoughts and interpretations – at a particular point in time and space – about how their lives were changed by, and went on after, Black Saturday. The reader was immersed in the Gippsland narratives throughout the three preceding chapters (Five, Six & Seven). This discussion draws on those rich insights and examines their meaning and significance through a lens that is comprised of the secondary literature (Chapter Two) in tandem with a selection of Bourdieu’s ‘thinking tools’ (Chapter Three) which have theoretically oriented this work. In this chapter I endeavour to

create an “intuitively convincing account of the meaning of the text as a whole in the light of the constituent parts that make it up” (Bruner, 1991, p. 7).

Explanation of the chapter’s structure

This discussion is anchored by the major and sub themes that were extracted from the Gippsland narratives (Chapter Four). All of these themes, *ubiquitous* and *unique*, intersect and sometimes collide with the micro, meso and macro levels of society (explained in Chapter One). Those three levels serve as a hermeneutic device allowing me to move between the parts and the whole. It is important in the post-bushfire context to scrutinise the dynamics within and between these levels and think about their effects on fire-affected people *over time*.

Socioeconomic status, life cycle and gender are the three obvious axes in this study, which are also “deeply implicated in the ways in which” the interviewees “inhabit and experience space and place” (Massey, 1992, p. 9). As noted earlier (in Chapter One) gender is less prominent than socioeconomics and life cycle; the content of this discussion will reflect this. For the Latrobe Valley residents the post-bushfire landscape, encompassing the natural, social, psychological, physical, sensorial, financial and emotional, was chaotic and overwhelming. It is not surprising that it is tricky to write about what happened and more importantly *what matters* to fire-affected people. To impose order on such intense upheaval feels counterintuitive. Yet this discussion must convey how I made sense of the interviewees’ post-bushfire ‘sense making’ and crucially, indicate where the value of this work lies: what is my contribution to the understanding of how people feel and go on with their lives after bushfire?

The following five core concepts assist me with this task:³³

- home, possessions and everyday sensory practices (Part One)
- language and time (Part Two)

As indicated above, these concept groupings provide a loose, two-part structure for this discussion. Nested within these five concepts are a multitude of subtleties that constitute the grey areas from which I believe there is much to learn. Towards the tail end of this chapter I offer details about my perceptions of where the gaps in this study lie and how with more investigation and scrutiny they can be addressed in the future. An additional component woven into this section of the discussion is an exploration of those absences. This process constitutes “looking into the cracks more deeply”, when more becomes visible (Clandinin et al, 2010, p. 84).

³³ How I arrived at these five concepts was explained in Chapter Four.

It is important to remember that the loss of life on 7 February 2009, 173 people in all, was unprecedented in the post-colonial records of bushfire related fatalities in Australia. Resources across the State of Victoria were understandably stretched. Yet the literature repeatedly refers to bushfire as an intrinsic part of the Australian landscape and it has always been so. Australia has “by far the more damaging fires” (Pyne, 2006, p. 6) of any other country. It is assumed that the inhabitants are aware that “fire is as much a part of life as sunshine, drought and animals that bite” (Clark, 2007, p.163). Thus it is inevitable, particularly with the population growth at the rural-urban interface³⁴ that emergency service systems and ‘recovery’ programs will be under similar if not greater pressure in the not too distant future.

Part One

Home, possessions and everyday sensory practices

In Chapter Two I engaged with the multitude of meanings contained within the concept of ‘home’. Across and within many disciplines home is a contested concept. Whilst home is far from being universally a safe/comfortable/positive space³⁵, for the purpose of this research home (for all but one of the participants prior to Black Saturday) represented security, familiarity and continuity. There is a correlation between high levels of home ownership and positive relationships to home and place (Chapter Two). In this study, the feelings and connections that residents had established with their home and the wider natural environment, was severed or disrupted on Black Saturday; this study explores the shifts and changes with the human/non-human relationship after abrupt rupture.

The anthropological research conducted by Miller (2008, 2010) and Pink (2006, 2009, 2012), previously documented in Chapter Two, reinforces the critical role of objects in our everyday lives and the *comfort of things*. Pink contends that domestic practices are multisensory (2006) and that practices are inextricable from place (2012). She asserts that social researchers would benefit from understanding ‘home’ as a ‘site of sensory consumption’ and that they should form an appreciation of the sensory and material agencies of home (Pink, 2012, p. 52). In her earlier

³⁴ The rural-urban interface, also known in North America as the ‘wildland-urban interface’ (WUI) is residential areas on the fringe of cities/suburbs where communities intermix with or abut natural vegetation. There is a socioeconomic link to this urban spread; escalating property prices and high rents in major cities across Australia are forcing lower income households out of metropolitan areas and into more affordable locations that are more prone to bushfire. Separate to this contingent are the often wealthier ‘sea/tree changers’ who seek proximity to nature in bushfire prone locations.

³⁵ Over the last five years the homeless population in Australia increased by 4.6% (ABS, 2016, Census).

publication Pink (2006) called for methods of inquiry that engage with the “pluri-sensory” character of the home: the smells, sounds and tastes of home, as well as its seen and tangible properties. Smells and sounds are an integral part of home and how memories of home are evoked. Cieraad (2010) writes that a particular smell may even “trigger the memory of a domestic practice, its leading actors and the domestic stage involved, as for example, the smell-related memory of one’s mother baking cookies in the kitchen...”. These multi-sensory elements united with familiar practices contribute to developing a sense of belonging and of being ‘at home’. Regular interactions between people and their possessions often comprised of movements together through the intimate domestic space, this finding links neatly with Bourdieu’s concepts of *habitus* and *field* (detailed in Chapter Three).

A major contributor to the comforts of home is the “consistent location of furniture and useful items so that deliberation is not required in the conduct of daily activities” (Angus et al. 2005, p. 173). The seemingly unconscious movements and actions undertaken within the domestic space over the course of a day, repeated over weeks, months and years, contributes significantly to our sense of control, security and continuity. That taken for granted stability also provides a sense of order and routine; time *feels* linear. The destruction of a familiar space, compounded by the loss of furniture and special/generic possessions, can be extremely disorienting and distressing. Five of the participants were at the time of our interview, deeply unsettled by living in an unfamiliar structure, (either a house built in the same location or a house purchased in Traralgon) that held no, or minimal meaningful or familiar possessions which could anchor them to their pre-bushfire selves. This embodied ambiguity can be felt at the pointier end of the continuum, as ‘*Who am I?*’

The Gippsland narratives demonstrate the speed at which an individual or family can be rendered homeless by a sudden onset disaster, graphically revealing the fragilities of home and the complexities of reconstituting home. Marcus (2006, p. 245) writes, “specific memories embedded in place cannot be fully experienced by anyone else”. The extension of this statement is that each individual’s memories of place are unique and therefore the loss incurred by survivors of disaster cannot be fully appreciated or understood by an ‘outsider’. This is also why people who have suffered some form of profound loss might feel a powerful sense of loneliness as they grieve their precious objects, animals and lost place/s or people.

Loss of emotional associations

He was there trying to find photos and all the things from Poland, and so he lost the lot and he felt very, very guilty about that (Jude).

The destruction of material culture remains under-acknowledged in the Australian disaster literature. Possessions that contain the deepest meanings are “those that are able to evoke for us particular memories of other times, other places, and other people” (Belk, 1988, p. 29). Self-identity is entwined with the presence of, and our interaction with, unique and generic objects. In his exploratory study of older people’s relationship with possessions, Boschetti (1995, p.10) found that having special objects in the environment provided “strong supports for maintenance of psychological well-being”. All of the homeless and some of the non-displaced participants in this research spoke about the meanings behind specific items that had been destroyed on Black Saturday. Objects that were treasured and mourned were often connected to a family member (a father, mother or child) or a close friend who was no longer physically present. The sudden and comprehensive loss of special possessions, conduits to memories of deceased people, was painful and emotionally taxing. The couple rendered homeless, Irena and Leon whose son had died when he was fifteen, were stripped of all the mementoes of his childhood; the wooden box he’d made at school and the tape recording of his speech as a toddler had been their most cherished possessions. This potent sense of loss was not restricted to the homeless. Several of the non-displaced interviewees, whose home was either damaged or remained intact, suffered extensive losses. Graham and his adult son extinguished flames in the ceiling cavity that was threatening to burn their home to the ground. Graham spoke about the disconnection between his past and his present/future due to the loss of meaningful objects stored in a shed that was destroyed on Black Saturday:

It had my father’s stuff, it had some of my wife’s father’s stuff, a lot of the stuff that we had collected...and I’m convinced reasonably well, that, that shed was my identity. That shed said who I was. It was not only me, it was my origins as well – and that’s what went, and it was a case of trying to come to grips with sort of, **I’ve gone. I’m still here, but I’ve gone** (Graham, emphasis added).

Graham’s words encapsulate his feelings of despair at the loss of meaningful items that linked him and his wife to their family’s heritage. His narrative indicates that an important component of Graham’s sense of self was also destroyed on Black Saturday and reinforces the emotionally complicated and unresolved losses that reverberate into the future.

Photographs were the most common material object that participants spoke about. These images hold or freeze in time elements of our current and future selves. Sontag (1979, p. 8) states:

Through photographs, each family constructs a portrait – chronicle of itself– a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness. It hardly matters what activities are photographed so long as photographs get taken and are cherished.

As detailed earlier in Chapter Four, during the interviews I was frequently shown ‘before’ and ‘after’ images of home and the wider natural landscape. Whilst digital images did feature in two interviews the traditional printed photograph was the main form that I encountered. In Chapter Two it was noted that many studies have shown that home is closely connected to family, memory and nostalgia. Photographs can function as tangible representations of these connections and evidence of personal and family history. Rose (2003) investigates the prime role of photographs in the process of a house evolving into a ‘home’. For the participants who had most or all of their photographs destroyed, the memories of more stable times remain inaccessible unless other family members can provide duplicates. The absence of family photos contributes to the embodied sense of unsettledness, and specifically the ‘sterility’ that several dispossessed participants spoke about. The emotions of sadness and guilt lingered for interviewees as an outcome of losing irreplaceable possessions and not being able to pass their possessions on to the next generation.

Loss of livestock

...and that's what I was concerned about more than anything else, you know (Malcolm).

This bushfire study reinforces the importance of the human-animal relationship and how it can contribute to, or for some people, define a ‘sense of place’. Nearly a quarter of the Gippsland interviews contained grief for the loss of that bond, often established over years of daily interactions. For all but one of the farming participants the death of their livestock was the most distressing aspect of Black Saturday. These interviewees were troubled by the circumstances of how their livestock perished by asphyxiation or being unable to flee the flames due to fencing and, the scale of their loss in some cases entire herds. Several participants spoke about being prevented by official roadblocks from returning to their property. They were unsure during this anxious time whether any of their animals continued to suffer. Being unable to attend to their livestock, as soon as the immediate danger had receded, took a significant emotional toll on some of the hobby/part and full-time farmers. Over two years later the knowledge that their animals suffered for as many as four days continued to torment a few of the male interviewees.

The cattle, goats and sheep represented for some of these participants part or their entire livelihood. The Latrobe Valley narratives confirm that the coordination of animal relief after the crisis was “fragmented” (Teague et al, 2010, p. 322). That absence of assistance due to lack of

cohesion at the macro/meso levels (State/Local Government), constituted secondary trauma for most of the livestock owners in this study. A few of these men did receive practical assistance during the culling/post-bushfire care of their dead and/or injured livestock. Sometimes this assistance was delayed:

To have these cows that he sort of knew like family members, just dead, and Council took a long time to get rid of them. Because it was so hot, when they did attend the animals just broke up, like legs and feet and things just fell off. (Graham)

Other participants resorted to euthanasing and/or burying their animals alone or with the help of neighbours or family. Erik recalled that it was his son-in-law who “sneaked in the back way and came up here and shot all the animals that were all suffering”. The confusion at the macro level caused an avoidable self-reliance. I am thinking here of Pete, solitary at a mass grave he’d dug on his charred land for his beloved goats: “I had to bury 86...and I cried every time I picked one up”. He had to conduct this gruesome task after nearly losing his life and witnessing from a short distance his hand-built home burn to the ground.

As documented previously (Chapter Four) there was a diversity of land sizes and uses across the participating households. Despite the low number of full-time farmers within the sample there are useful links that can be made with the FMD (foot-and-mouth disease) research conducted by Convery et al. (2005). Importantly, there is a temporal element to their study, which raises awareness about:

...how the emotional geographies of livestock farming are entangled within human constructions of nature, with human and non-human identities constructed through ideas and practices played out in different contexts at different times and places (Convery et al. 2005, p. 101).

The emotional and temporal connections between people and their animals, something that is often taken for granted in everyday life, is difficult to articulate. For the Gippsland interviewees who owned livestock before Black Saturday, meeting or responding to the essential needs of their cows, sheep and goats was integral to their daily routine. Irvine (2004) draws attention to the importance of animals in shaping human lives and identities. Each day, for the owners, is punctuated by interactions with their animals.

For most of the hobby/part and full-time farmers every animal was an individual; they had a name and their unique characteristics were familiar to, and recognised by, their owners. Harley, whose animals perished recalled:

I would come home of a night time and as I would drive down the road to come to the driveway, all my goats would lift their heads...and by the time I got out of the car they were all up at the gate and I would have to go over and give them a pat and a bit of chat to them all.

Pete shed tears when he spoke about his goats:

And they were pets, and we had a couple of ones that were stunted, and they wouldn't have grown up into much, but we kept them, and they were just the pets. They would run around, they would follow you everywhere you went, and if you would sit down they would sit on your lap, and yeah.

Sandra, whose husband Malcolm was a part-time farmer, made a poignant statement: "...it was worse for him because they were like children to him, his animals". A gendered dimension surfaces when the subject of livestock crops up in the Gippsland narratives because all the interviewees who spoke with me about the hurt caused by the loss of their animals were men. Most likely this is because it was in the main, the men who interacted daily with the livestock, made decisions about their welfare and were ultimately responsible for the management of the property or farm. I encountered one exception to this. Pete described his ex-wife (who did not participate in this study) as totally committed to their goat farm: "The goats took up all her life". According to Pete, the goats were her passion and shaped both their lives over the course of two decades. In this instance it was the woman who fulfilled a proactive role in all the tasks and decisions related to running their goat breeding business. Pete's anecdote about the goats taking up all their time is a reminder of the temporal component. The length of time spent in the caring for and interacting with animals might intensify or prolong the emotional response to the sudden absence of entire herds in tragic circumstances. For Adam, the youngest male participant, time is a key factor in his grief:

I had 80 cows that I lost, and that was basically what **I had spent the last ten years doing**. And that was devastating – well it still is. And to me, it would have been easier to lose the house and save the cows...and it was really hard because **people just don't understand** (emphasis added).

Adam's worst-case scenario of loss, clashes with the official preoccupation with 'home'/homelessness and the widespread re-building agenda. His 'sense of self' and his everyday purpose spanning a decade revolved around his animals. By stating, "it would have been **easier** to lose the house" Adam is emphasising his emotional investment in his herd and how much smoother the official 'recovery' response is, from his perspective, for people who have been made homeless. This interviewee's painful loss of animals was exacerbated by the lack of recognition from the 'official'/macro level of the 'recovery' response, which constituted disenfranchised grief, which paradoxically by its very nature exacerbates grief (Doka, 1999, p. 39).

One aspect of FMD livestock deaths in Cumbria strongly resonates with the Gippsland farmers' experience: "...culling regimes covered key spaces on the farm and parts of the farming landscape with death and dying" (Convery et al. 2005, p. 105). The FMD research indicated the

transgression of emotional geography: “The [off-site] abattoir would normally provide spatial distancing and some emotional detachment” (Convery et al, 2005, p. 105). The close proximity, a constant visual reminder, was a factor for Harley and his grief:

...they were shallow buried by one of the council guys that came around, and they dug a little hole, and you would see these two mounds up in the paddock, and that was Billy and Nanny, so every time I would look over there I would get a little bit teary.

It's just not the same. There's nothing the same about the place (Paul).

Decision-making around where to live and how to re-create ‘home’ in the aftermath of Black Saturday was seamless for some people and difficult for others. When couples were not in agreement about whether to relocate or rebuild, one person had to forfeit their preference. Being deprived of the opportunity to return to their acreage was painful for Cass who was stuck living in town. Whilst socioeconomics and life cycle were key factors in post-bushfire decision-making (as detailed in Chapter Six), emotions and perceptions relating to possible future bushfire risk were additional complicating elements.

This research highlights the importance of the bureaucracy and ‘outsiders’ in general (encompassing non-fire affected residents in the local region and beyond), making more effort to grasp the knowledge that the intensity of *grief* and *homesickness* for some fire-affected people may or may not diminish, *over time*. Individuals and families who are forced to live in unsuitable accommodation removed from their familiar place/landscape (now rendered unfamiliar by fire) can be seduced into believing (or wanting to believe) that returning – through the process of rebuilding – will remedy their embodied unsettledness. That emotional yearning for all the complex facets that over the course of many years create ‘home’, eclipses the intellectual knowing that the pre-crisis home can never be replicated. It is difficult to articulate what ‘home’ means or feels like in times of stability and so it is unsurprising that abrupt homelessness through destruction by bushfire does not lend itself to description using conventional language.

It doesn't feel like home, it's not the same, and we're not comfortable (Lisa).

Whilst the timeframes of ‘recovery’ are often measured by the visual progress of structural rebuilding, the hidden and often intense emotional repercussions do not necessarily dilute as time passes. The ‘normal’ stresses associated with everyday life add to the burden of traumatic change or loss. When the Gippsland interviews were conducted a significant number of the displaced participants were experiencing ongoing unsettledness. Their descriptions of how the house they were living in at the time of the interview made them *feel* was reminiscent of Albrecht's *solastalgia*, being the emotional suffering after ‘home’/sense of place is disrupted or destroyed, is not something that can be alleviated by counselling or other conventional

‘recovery’ services that are provided to assist fire-affected people. Several interviewees expressed confusion and/or disorientation in regards to how or whether to accept their current accommodation as permanent. The flow-on affects, financially, socially and emotionally continued unrelentingly for a considerable number of participants. This reinforces the harm that can be done by imposing unrealistic timeframes on the rebuilding and ‘recovery’ process. The intersection between the axes that were emphasised at the outset of this discussion (socioeconomics, life cycle and gender) can individually or in combination determine the intensity of the uneasiness and how incessant *solastalgia* is/can be embodied in each individual. Socioeconomics is a major factor for sustained *solastalgia*. This finding relating to emotional suffering and loss of ‘home’ echoes a UK flood study that emphasises how “multiple factors and processes combine to contribute to wider wellbeing outcomes” (Walker-Springett, Butler and Adger, 2017, p. 66).

For non-displaced bushfire survivors who remain in their utterly transformed environment *solastalgia* can manifest in mental and physical suffering. Albrecht’s research suggests that extensive damage to a place tends to cause more distress to people with deep roots in a particular environment (Albrecht, 2006). Two important points Albrecht raises are the speed at which the change occurs (slow onset or rapid change are quite different experiences) and that the condition constitutes an “undermining of personal and community sense of identity, belonging and control” (Albrecht, 2006, p. 35). That last word *control* is one that is peppered throughout the Gippsland narratives. The lack of agency over decisions that have a direct line to wellbeing was palpable amongst some of the dispossessed interviewees. Emerging from this research is the *solastalgia* that manifests within people who decided to rebuild and return to their original location in the belief that this will remedy their unsettledness. Additionally, *solastalgia* can occur (and did for the husband of one participant) in those whose home remained intact but were surrounded by a devastated landscape.

There was a whole world of people that I did not know existed, and now I do (Claire).

Whilst the repercussions of Black Saturday are heavily weighted in the negative there were some positive outcomes that were emphasised by a few interviewees (as documented in Chapter Seven). Gender surfaces here, as it was mainly women who articulated the positives, predominantly through the establishment of new, meaningful friendships grounded by the common element of Black Saturday and, more generally, re/engaging with their local community. The establishment of the ‘Stitch & Chat’ group was a key source of emotional and social support for a number of the participants in this study.

Part Two

The bulk of this discussion to this point has addressed the many elements within and in close proximity to the domestic space that contribute to shaping and sustaining an individual's 'sense of self'. Mirroring the findings of a UK flood study, the loss of personal possessions due to bushfire appeared to undermine many of the interviewees' 'sense of self' and sense of place (Tapsell and Tunstall, 2008). The interviewees' 'sense making' of the official 'recovery' response will be a primary focus in the remaining half of this chapter. It begins with the initial experience of *silence* and moves through the core concepts of language, time and the entanglements that occur between the micro, meso and macro levels of society, exploring how socioeconomics, life cycle and gender can shape whether, or how, individuals cope after a rupturing event.

There was nothing and no one – you were just alone in the landscape (Robyn).

Many of the Gippsland interviewees spoke at considerable length about the Government (macro) response to the bushfire crisis. Displaced and non-displaced participants shared their feelings about what happened, or didn't happen, in the immediate aftermath and beyond. Multiple interviewees mentioned the unexpected *silence* from the macro, in the hours and days following the crisis. None of the Gippslanders reported receiving a welfare check in the form of 'a knock on the door' (for those who still had them). That *silence* and the emotions that it triggered reverberated through several of the narratives. Particularly for those who were in survival-mode when the fire-front arrived, and also those who evacuated and felt outrage and disappointment on behalf of their friends and neighbours who might have perished. The absence of any initial even token encounter in those early hours and days with a representative from the macro level compounded in some cases, a strong sense of *isolation* in people who were *overwhelmed* and trying to make sense of the chaos that surrounded them. Whilst the *2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission* noted, "there was no systematic approach to checking the welfare of small communities and people remaining on properties" (Teague et al., 2010, p. 328), there is little acknowledgement of how that made already traumatised people *feel*.

'The forgotten fire'

I mean people from those areas don't know about us (Elyse).

This absence of any welfare check planted the seed, within the minds of some of the participants, of feeling forgotten or 'off the radar'. Occasionally an interviewee made reference to the *forgotten fires*. The high concentration of fatalities that occurred in locations, far removed from

Central Gippsland, (documented earlier in Chapter Four), meant that fire affected communities outside of those regions had substantially less media coverage. Consequently, some of the interviewees spoke of their feelings in relation to the low or non-existent, public awareness about Gippsland being hit hard by bushfire on that same day in February 2009. Elyse (Chapter Seven) was stunned that staff who were facilitating an ‘official’ recovery activity, a retreat for women, revealed they were completely unaware that there had been fires/fatalities in Central Gippsland on Black Saturday. Other attendees at the same event, who were from high profile Black Saturday locations, questioned the legitimacy of Elyse’s presence and her eligibility to participate in ‘recovery’ activities. *Why are you here? When was that fire?* From Elyse’s perspective, this demoralising experience constituted secondary trauma. Not only did she have to cope with and process the rupturing of her everyday life and future plans but she also had to manage her emotional responses to other traumatised people who were unaware that she too fled fire and was made homeless on Black Saturday.

Language and time after bushfire

Two dominant threads running through this exploratory study are the language of ‘recovery’, its affect on traumatised people, and the distorted sensation of time. These concepts, language and time, are tightly entwined. They both contribute to how and in some cases if; fire-affected people re-gain a ‘sense of self’ after the crisis. For people whose everyday lives have been disrupted or completely obliterated by bushfire, the significance of language originating at the official ‘recovery’ response (macro) level, is an important and, within the field of Australian disaster research, overlooked consideration. People, who are likely to be grappling with the most harrowing circumstances of their life, are subjected to the bureaucratic language and rigid systems of ‘recovery’. This official language, specifically its sway and how it makes fire affected people *feel over time*, warrants greater scrutiny.

The urgency that many of the homeless participants spoke of is echoed by the macro level’s infatuation with rapid reconstruction, this is when language and temporality unite, yearning to recreate their pre-bushfire ‘home’. Unfortunately for some of the homeless interviewees that resolved to re-establish ‘home’, their rebuilding or re-locating decisions were driven predominantly by intense emotion. Some decisions of this nature were made whilst the person/family was in shock. Didion (2012, p. 188) describes shock and the grief that follows as “...obliterative, dislocating to both body and mind”. Somewhat ironically emotion is absent from the exceedingly dry language of ‘recovery’. This bureaucratic speech, devoid of emotion and

complexity, contributes to the disparity so evident in the Gippsland narratives, between the simplistic thinking by the macro and the onerous realities confronting the micro. The key to beginning to understand this harmful disparity lies with *time*. The official ‘recovery’ response needs to cater to survivors/fire-affected people who live with a *distorted sensation of time*; for these people time does not work the way it did before the crisis.

That stark discrepancy of timescales has been flagged in an earlier bushfire study:

Indeed, the LECH [Lakes Entrance Community Health] counsellor reported that ‘... a lot of people fell over’ between 12 and 18 months after the fires, when most of the bushfire recovery programs had ended (Whittaker, 2008, p. 168).

The longitudinal UK flood study (Chapter Two) revealed the politics (and agendas) involved in macro decisions relating to ‘recovery’ when they stated:

...‘official’ attempts to offer help and support to residents find it hard to take account of the longer timescales needed for recovery to take place on the ground. For example, there are political pressures on the organizations involved in managing flood recovery which demand that the recovery process **must be seen to be completed as quickly as possible** in order for these organizations to be perceived as successful. Getting a quick resolution is also advantageous from the perspective of the taxpayer, who is (indirectly at least) paying for these additional support services (Whittle et al., 2010, p. 60, emphasis added).

I suggest that the speed at which the physical, non-domestic structures are rebuilt after a disaster lends a *coherence* and *linearity* to ‘recovery’ that will not for many of the homeless and some of the non-displaced residents living in the post-bushfire landscape, transpire at the individual/domestic level (the micro). The enticing prospect of *recovering* – wresting control from chaos – is a real and damaging by-product of the language that is scripted at the macro level and permeates the official ‘recovery’ effort implemented at the community level (the meso). Earlier, in Chapter Two, I indicated that much has been written about the meaning and application of two ‘r’ words *recovery* and *resilience*. Academics have questioned the assumptions that lie within, and the improper use of, these empty, overused words. It is worth reflecting again on a quote that featured in Chapter Two:

The terminology associated with disaster recovery is **biased towards optimism**. The key words – ‘recovery,’ ‘re-establish,’ ‘reconstruction,’ ‘restoration,’ and ‘rehabilitation’ – are prefixed with ‘re,’ indicating a return to the pre-existing situation. A more realistic view challenges the assumption that such recovery will actually be achieved. Instead, the more pessimistic argument suggests **there will be uncertainty, unforeseen events and even the reproduction of vulnerability**. A rather depressing implication...is that in some cases the most vulnerable households and individuals do not recover (Wisner et al. 2007, p. 357, emphasis added).

This optimism-bias might be useful initially to generate support and financial or tangible donations from ‘outsiders’, but harmful over the longer term for people who will seek or expect

to *return to their pre-existing situation*. The bushfire narratives illustrate the ambiguity concealed within prescribed timeframes of ‘recovery’: when has an individual/couple/family *recovered* and by what and whose measure?

Whilst the timeframes of ‘recovery’ are often measured by the structural rebuilding, the emotional repercussions can become more confusing and/or frustrating as time passes. When the Gippsland interviews were conducted some of the dispossessed participants were experiencing ongoing unsettledness. Several interviewees expressed confusion and/or disorientation in regards to how or whether to accept their current accommodation as permanent. The flow-on affects, financially, socially, emotionally, were unrelenting for these people and their families. This reinforces the harm that can be done by imposing unrealistic timeframes (refusing to commit to the long term), on the healing process.

You hear a lot in the area about relationships cracking... (Kristina).

It was apparent that the official ‘recovery’ response and how it was perceived, caused secondary harm or distress, in the post-bushfire lives of some participants. Officials operating at the ‘macro’ level were preoccupied with how many dwellings were destroyed (and rebuilt). Bureaucracy relishes and allows itself to be steered by statistics and tangible, timetabled, outcomes; “policy makers are particularly interested in numbers” (Martens, Halkier & Pink, 2013, p. 7). This runs counter to the lived experience of re-establishing domestic routines within or outside of a post-bushfire landscape.

Because I fall into the gaps, because I don’t own my own house, I’m not living on my own, owning a house, and I’m not a kid (Elyse).

The narratives of Elyse and Adam, who were not home owners as they were both living with their parents’ pre-bushfire, reveal the hurt and frustration generated by the failings of the macro to recognise or validate what non-home owners had endured. Their experiences of fleeing fire (Elyse) and of reluctantly staying to help fend off fire (Adam), were not ambiguous; both were traumatised and suffered extensive losses. These losses included livestock, farming infrastructure, meaningful possessions, future plans and a familiar place to live along with all the other intangible elements documented earlier in this chapter (and thesis, see Chapters Five, Six and Seven). Knowing that their bushfire experience and subsequent losses/disruptions failed to fit neatly into a macro-designed category, caused ongoing secondary distress.

Elyse and Adam felt as if they were being penalised for not being home owners. Both of these interviewees expressed anger and cited their treatment by the ‘macro’ as the primary reason why they completely withdrew from all forms of official ‘recovery’ events and activities that were

taking place within their local community. I suggest here that the attitude of the macro to the non-home owners (micro) undermined the potential healing that was being facilitated at the meso level. This exposes the *entanglement* occurring within and across the three social levels. This can intensify the already emotionally and socially complex post-disaster landscape. The fact that two of the 33 participants did not ‘fit’ neatly into a bushfire-affected profile is no reflection on the value of this finding. Dedicating time and space to an issue of merit, regardless of how in/frequent it surfaces in the ‘data’³⁶, is one of the major benefits of qualitative research. Crucially in narrative research, a finding is significant if it is important (Polkinghorne, 1988).

Case management and ambiguities

I mean when your internet's gone, when your phone's gone, everything's gone, well how can you - and nobody else was passing any information on (Cass).

The Victorian Bushfire Case Management Service (VBCMS), overseen by the then Department of Human Services (DHS)³⁷, was introduced four days after the Black Saturday crisis. The objective of the VBCMS was to:

...ease access to the plethora of services, grants and information available to people; strengthen the capacity of traumatised people over time; and to contribute to a reduction in the stressors affecting people through their recovery (Urbis, 2011, p. 2).

Fire-affected people who were assigned a case manager had in theory, access to a professional who would assist them with navigating complicated systems of ‘recovery’ across local, state and federal government levels. Whilst the participants in this study welcomed the case management concept, the actual implementation on the ground was significantly flawed, and this undermined its primary purpose. Considering the dire situation facing fire-affected people, the full implementation of the program, “put in place probably within a period of two-and-a-half months” (Teague et al., 2010, p. 335), was sluggish.

For some of the Gippsland interviewees a case manager was assigned too long after the bushfire to be constructive. Parkinson (2014, p. 132) states that supporting fire-affected people during the convoluted tasks and processes in the aftermath of the bushfire “worked only where individuals were less challenged, or more resourced, and where case managers were highly skilled”. There were participants in this study who were fire-affected but were not offered a case manager,

³⁶ In Chapter Four I quoted van Manen (2006, p. 53): the concept of ‘data’ “has quantitative overtones” – this is the primary reason why I choose to alternate between ‘narratives’, ‘post-bushfire narratives’, ‘Gippsland narratives’ and so on, when referring to the primary material. The word ‘data’ in this research dehumanises the deeply personal primary material.

³⁷ Since re-named: Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)

notably Elyse, Adam and Alan/Jackie (couple). People, such as Cass, who was made homeless, had to initiate contact and advocate for a case manager to be assigned to her family. Several participants ruminated on the lack of continuity (due to the high turnover of case managers) and the uncertainty around who was eligible and for how long the assistance would last. A few of the Gippsland recipients felt that their (final) case manager withdrew prematurely (possibly, they felt due to a perception of 'higher need' elsewhere in their caseload) and in an ad hoc vague manner. Across the narratives where case managers had been assigned there was no clear sense of how the substantial gap (in time) between the end of case management and the beginning of long-term 'recovery' would be bridged. The feeling of being left to their own devices abruptly was for several of the Gippslanders a sour ending to their relationship with the VBCMS.

The term 'prison of experience', whereby human systems operate within the parameters set by previous experience and short-term expectations, (Handmer and Dovers, 2009, p. 202) resonates temporally within Australian post-disaster landscapes and specifically with this post-bushfire narrative inquiry. The scoping interviews that were conducted in advance of the Gippsland fieldwork (Chapter Four) highlighted the harm that can be inflicted by uncertainty; three month contracts renewed over and over and over again. The case manager, or in the instance of one scoping interviewee, the counsellor, working at the meso level with the bushfire affected residents (surviving at the micro level) were compromised by the 'short-termism' at the macro level that ultimately devalued their vital work. Building and maintaining relationships of trust with a client takes time. These short-term contracts, renewed at the eleventh hour by 'faceless' bureaucrats, nourishes ambiguity, breaches a basic duty of care, whilst hindering 'recovery'. This 'short-termism' was a common criticism from interviewees with direct experience of the VBCMS and illustrates the desire of the macro to reign in the spending. In our capitalistic society more time essentially means more money. And yet four three-month contracts equates to a year: how is it, with our frequency of bushfires, floods and cyclones, in conjunction with our knowledge about 'recovery', that a one year commitment (which is insufficient on its own) is not made immediately at the outset? Handmer and Dovers (2009, p. 195) affirm that this lack of vision is in the main, due to political machinations:

Often, heroic efforts will be made to 'get things back to normal'. Relevant here is the fact that decision-making processes in our political and commercial frameworks generally operate over very short time horizons (such as annual financial reports or the next election) and thus are only cognizant of currently visible, near-term costs and benefits.

International and national research (Chapter Two) confirms the *slow* and *non-linear* process of dealing with abrupt rupturing of everyday life. As Hoffman wrote, years after the 1991 Oakland

Firestorm: “Who I am, what I was, what I intended to do, the fabric of my life, utterly *unravelling*” (Hoffman, 1998, p. 56, emphasis added). I suggest that because this ‘unravelling’ is unable to be measured, plotted on a graph or truly ‘seen’, the physical re-establishment of ‘home’ overshadows the emotional and psychological components of healing after trauma. Until the bureaucrats and policy-makers accept that time is not experienced or lived in a conventional way (‘human-time’ or ‘clock-time’) by those who are *overwhelmed* or *traumatised*, the yawning gap between the macro and micro levels – and the *entanglement* occurring within and across all levels inclusive of the meso – will not diminish.

Surfacing

A substantial number of displaced and non-displaced interviewees described coming ‘up for air’ within similar timeframes, which cruelly coincided with the withdrawal of the programs or resources administered by the macro level. This underlying thread of contradictory timeframes exposes the clash of the micro and the macro. A few of the male participants, who had been working hard physically at restoring their properties, stated that they had recently reached the point of recognising they needed help in the form of mental/emotional health. When they finally allocated time to attend to their wellbeing the service was no longer available as bushfire programs/assistance had been wound up. A gender dimension does arise here; men in particular, but not exclusively, were extremely busy and kept themselves occupied with practical tasks associated with restoration and re-establishment. These men either recognised they needed help and denied themselves the time to pursue that help prior to the counselling programs being wound up, or they believed that they were tracking alright without any form of support or counselling. Women in contrast, were well catered for with social groups established pre and post-Black Saturday. Women in the main were pro-active about seeking support through informal or official pathways. Clarifying the gendered dimensions of the non-linear experience of time and self-care – in the post-disaster context – needs to be acknowledged (and lies outside the scope of this current study).

‘Give yourself time’

The title of Chapter Seven, *Give Yourself Time*, consists of three valuable words. It was Robyn, who was residing in a modified shed with outdoor bathroom facilities, who summed up the advice other participants shared with me. Their key message for future fire/hazard affected people was to delay any major decisions for at least one year. Advice of this nature is not new. Survivors of earlier catastrophic bushfires, namely the 2003 Canberra fires and the 1983 Ash

Wednesday fires in Victoria and South Australia, noted the benefit of taking time to process the unforeseen circumstances. But from the perspective of the macro, survivors are not encouraged to follow that well-informed, and painfully acquired advice. To prematurely speed up the slow and difficult process of healing – with timeframes, budgets and pressure to decide about whether to rebuild – conspires to further exacerbate challenges and/or secondary trauma down the track. Enacting Robyn's three wise words is at odds with the pressure predominantly from the macro level, to hurry and rebuild or make a decision about where to live. There is little tolerance for taking ample time to process and sit with the new surreal reality. During my fieldwork in 2011, the local Council deadline concerning people who *were still* residing in modified sheds or caravans on their fire-affected land was looming. One interviewee was scrambling to complete the requirements and obtain the paperwork in order to be approved by Council to continue residing in his post-bushfire accommodation that he had constructed on his 16 acres. Whilst some people, who were homeless, nominated with/without negative financial consequences to re-build bigger or better, others who had more modest needs were not immune to red tape and manufactured timeframes.

Bourdieuian language

It reminded me of the stress when my mother died...I couldn't even do the dishes, I couldn't even hang out the washing, I just couldn't do it (Carmen).

The valuable ideas of Pierre Bourdieu (Chapter Three) are, within the context of this study, instructive. Words hold power and have the capacity to instil false hope and contribute to secondary harm. Bourdieu's 'thinking tools' provide alternative ways to address the discord between the macro and the micro. Language, the choice and application of words, was central to the work of Bourdieu. He frequently disregarded conventional words preferring to reinvigorate antique words or coin his own phrases. The primary aim of this exercise was to compel the reader to pay closer attention to the *weight and meaning of words* and specifically tune into and engage with his unique concepts. Bourdieu (1993, p. 21, emphasis added) states:

In order to break with the social philosophy that runs through everyday words and also **in order to express things that ordinary language cannot express**...the sociologist has to resort to invented words, which are thereby protected, relatively at least, from the naive projections of common sense. **These words are secure against hijacking** because their 'linguistic nature' predisposes them to withstand hasty readings...and perhaps especially because they are inserted, **locked, into a network of relationships that impose constraints.**

Focusing on the 'recovery' language that dominates and arguably misrepresents the post-disaster space may on the surface appear naive. Dedicating time and thought to word choice, whilst refraining from making declarations that cannot be guaranteed, could potentially dilute some of

the frustration and confusion that consistently surfaced across the Gippsland narratives. The official ‘recovery’ discourse was for some interviewees considered counterproductive and/or provocative. In many ways their post-disaster stresses were amplified by the application of rigid measures of ‘loss’ in conjunction with a lack of transparency and continuity.

Bourdieuian language is a welcome antidote to “accepting everyday classifications and categories; as a means of breaking from orthodox language” (Grenfell, 2008, p. 222). By drawing on the concepts adapted or created by Pierre Bourdieu I can separate myself from the damaging official ‘recovery’ discourse and explore the *nuances* and *emotions* associated with ‘living in’ or ‘being displaced from’ a post-bushfire landscape. There are complicated secondary losses that cascade from the tangible losses of home, animals and possessions. The sensation of rupture for people who suddenly find their everyday lives have been fractured or comprehensively destroyed is best described as *hysteresis* (Chapter Four); the word Bourdieu uses to name the mismatch between *habitus* and *field*. As stated earlier in this thesis, Bourdieu explains *habitus* as being acquired over time during childhood and that these dispositions contribute to our sense of self and wellbeing into, and throughout, adulthood. Through *habitus*, writes Bourdieu (1989, p.19) “we have a world of common sense, a world that seems self-evident”. *Habitus* thus implies a ‘sense of one’s place’ but also a ‘sense of the place of others’ inclusive of material culture (Bourdieu, 1989). When a trauma, “frequently theorised as unspeakable, resistant to representation” (Douglas & Whitlock, 2008, p. 1), ruptures the equilibrium the unsettledness or disorientation that it generates is felt differently as “each individual responds in their own way to the unfamiliar situation” (Hardy, 2008, p. 146). Importantly, *hysteresis* contains a time-dimension that is missing from conventional, or bureaucratic, definitions of ‘recovery’. *Hysteresis* describes a particular sort of change that “involves a mismatch and a time lag, between the change in each of the previously ‘well-behaved’ elements that are ontologically distinct but interrelated” (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 17). No longer sure who or where they are in the world, the dispossessed suffer through temporal and spatial ruptures in the context of an unknown future (Hardy, 2008).

Research/life constraints

My disjointed candidature meant it took more time than initially expected to complete this work. In Chapter One I reflected on my own wrestle through the turmoil of birth and grief with conventional measures of time and how those two unprecedented experiences shaped my

interpretation of, and relationship with, the primary material. I involuntarily acquired insight into the “stresses that undo”, “disarticulate” and distort time (Riessman, 2015, p. 1059).

Had circumstances been different and time allowed I would have liked to return to the Latrobe Valley for a second follow-up interview with participants who consented to meet again. That hypothetical meeting represents a tantalising opportunity to further disentangle the denser more convoluted Gippsland narratives. Whilst preparing for the second interviews I could learn how many of the participants, who had expressed frustration/disappointment with their living arrangements during the first interview, had relocated in the interim. The location of their new residence would signify their ongoing commitment to remain in, or completely disengage from, the local community where we first met. I could ask: *Has moving into a different house/location changed how you feel?* I would also ask if they were willing to share any thoughts (or regrets) about their decision to participate in this research. *How do the interviewees feel about their deeply personal slices of narrative forming a key ingredient of my thesis?* It would be useful to gauge whether the passage of yet more time, the general yardstick of ‘recovery’ applied in western industrialised societies, has in fact changed or altered their sense of self after the catastrophic event named Black Saturday. I remain curious about the *unravelling* and how the interviewees might reflect on, and speak about, that portion of their lives with greater hindsight. In regards to the instances of personal growth or transformation spoken about by a number of the female interviewees, have those post-bushfire social connections been sustained? *Have any other benefits, or positive outcomes, transpired since our first interview?*

Suggestions for future investigation

As previously stated, given the history and predicted severity of future fires there is a need for more Australian social research that focuses on the ‘afterwards’. The key non-scientific areas of national bushfire research comprise “risk perception, homeowner preparedness and response during fires, and community safety” (Moritz et al, 2014, p. 62). More longitudinal ‘after’ bushfire/hazard research would expand our collective knowledge about the heavy burden of severe disasters manifested at the household (micro) and community (meso) levels, following a rupturing geo-event. Supplementary research can plug the gaps specific to this current study.

Within the post-disaster research space the following ideas and thoughts warrant more time and investigation.

Renting

I noted earlier, in Chapter Four, a conspicuous absence of the voice of those people who rent accommodation. Successfully recruiting and listening to the perspectives of renters is vital. Whilst conducting my fieldwork I was told about tenants who were forced to vacate in order for the accommodation to be utilised by the owners (investors) who had been made homeless on Black Saturday. Anecdotes such as these are reminders of the power imbalance between home owners and renters. It also reinforces that demographic disruptions can occur swiftly after a disaster and that socio-economic profile plays a pivotal role in this, ensuing displacement of local renters. Unscathed by the flames and embers, non-displaced tenants have no protection from what I call ‘bushfire/disaster eviction’. Due to someone else’s sudden homelessness the renters’ displacement occurs indirectly to but as a consequence of, the bushfire crisis. Should they wish to remain in the local area, they would need to compete with homeless individuals/couples and families seeking rental accommodation. The pre-disaster characteristics of neighbouring towns or communities can undergo sudden social change due to an increase in demand for temporary and/or long-term housing. Nearby towns can also feel the flow-on effects through an unforeseen population spike as disaster affected individuals, couples and families seek out rental accommodation or permanent tenure either through replenishing a mortgage or, if well-insured, purchasing a house outright. The following questions, which fall under the theme of ‘housing tenure’, warrant more examination:

- *How common is eviction after a natural/human-induced crisis?*
- *How does ‘bushfire/disaster eviction’ affect the household’s/family’s future?*
- *How do official ‘recovery’ programs assist renters, who have been evicted due to bushfire? If so, how? If not, why not?*

Younger people

I secured ethical approval to interview people over the age of eighteen (Chapter Four). During my fieldwork it was rare to encounter a fire-affected resident under the age of thirty. Around half of the participants in this study were grandparents and the majority of the other half were comprised of parents with adult or primary school aged children. There were five exceptions: three participants had infants and two participants (Elyse and Adam) were not parents. Given the substantial strains on family during the rebuilding of lives and homes, it is essential to obtain insights from people who are at various points in the life cycle. Adult children are, for reasons commonly associated with the escalating costs of tertiary education, housing and general ‘living’

expenses, residing longer with their parents than previous generations. In this instance after Black Saturday they did not fit neatly into any ‘recovery’ category. This prompts the question: *Do the prescribed categories of ‘recovery’ reflect our social reality?*

Future research needs to obtain a more balanced perspective of the younger cohort’s post-bushfire circumstances. It is necessary to be mindful and shrewd in regard to recruiting young adults to participate in post-disaster related research.

Of specific interest to me are younger people’s insights into:

- *How has living in multiple dwellings over a short timeframe affected their future plans?*
- *How did temporary living conditions affect the family dynamic?*
- *How did the young person feel about whether they were involved in their parent’s decision to rebuild or relocate, and the importance of whether it was an unfamiliar environment/social landscape?*

Intergenerational trauma

I was mindful, particularly during my interview with Pete, that his adult children living interstate and overseas, no longer had access to any mementoes that collectively, comprised an account of their ‘growing up’ years in the Latrobe Valley. There was no archive of their lives; evidence of their shared history no longer existed. Pete’s granddaughter will not have an opportunity to interact with the material/sensory environment of her mother’s childhood home. The newly formed memories of this generation (the grandchildren) will always be associated with, or begin from, a post-bushfire landscape. Essentially, Black Saturday infiltrates the life stories of people who were not yet born; the sudden rupture reverberates through the generations emotionally and/or financially.

The emotional and/or psychological consequences of catastrophic bushfire reach far beyond the fire ground. Walsh (1998, p. 14) states, “even individuals who are not directly touched by a crisis are affected by the family response, with reverberations for all other relationships”. Too little attention is dedicated to the perspective of absent adult children whose lives have been established elsewhere. *How is the loss of the home, and the childhood/personal possessions it contained, felt from a distance?* This experience of bushfire potentially constitutes disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1999). For the adult children whose parent/s were under-insured, had no insurance, or over-committed financially to counter-act painful losses caused by Black

Saturday, their future prospects might be reduced. Their parent/s may have to post-pone retirement and possibly seek financial support, in the short to long term from their adult children. The depletion of inheritance could have repercussions for their generation and beyond. Triggered by the crisis there are positive and negative changes within their family of origin as a result of the stresses in the form of physical, emotional and mental fatigue. As documented earlier (here and in Chapter Seven), relationships can *strengthen or fray* after a rupturing event. Comprehending from a geographic distance, the complex and time intensive challenges that their parent/s faced in order to reconstruct their everyday lives could be problematic. The non-linear sensation of time in conjunction with the absence of leisure time is also a factor for family functioning and family dynamics after bushfire.

Essentially, these adult children have been “forced to process, in the absence of direct experience of the crisis, the sudden disappearance of materials that were associated with their past and their family’s history” (Proudley, 2008, p. 137). In this current study, all of these insights relating to the adult children who no longer live in the Latrobe Valley were gleaned via their parents. There were instances where a parent/parents had either not considered the crisis from their child’s/children’s perspective or had been surprised by the emotional response from a son or daughter who lives elsewhere, but for whom the place/home contains important memories. It would be useful to hear directly from people with childhood connections to the destroyed landscape; *have/how have their lives been affected by Black Saturday?*

Writing is a reflexive activity that involves the totality of our physical and mental being (van Manen, 2006, p. 126). Whilst I was wrestling with this chapter, I reflected on the spatial and constantly expanding temporal distances between the participants and myself, in this study. I have been immersed in their voices and the associated concepts and theories over many years. I mull over this temporal inhibiting element of my research and how it has shaped my interpretations of the Gippsland narratives. Inevitably time is a major facet of my role as researcher. I inhabit a position far removed in time and space from the post-bushfire landscape in the Latrobe Valley where I gathered words from fire-affected people. I do hope that where I currently subsist, an awkward suspension does not compromise this research that grapples with loss, displacement and estrangement in the wake of disaster. *Does the time-intensive nature of the disentangling, the act of ‘sense making, undermine the value of the work as a whole?* By emphasising the significance of “finding ways to make meaning out of, and to communicate, catastrophes that happen to others as well as to oneself”, Kaplan (2005, cited in Hua 2009, p. 144) helps to alleviate my concerns. She states that it is necessary for us to achieve “empathetic sharing” as opposed to

what she calls ‘empty empathy’ –“empathy elicited by images of suffering provided without context...merely fragments of a large, complex situation” (Kaplan 2005, cited in Hua, 2009, p. 144). Grappling to express one’s own voice in the midst of an inquiry “designed to capture the participants’ experience and represent their voices, whilst simultaneously attempting to create a research text that will speak to, and reflect upon the audience’s voices” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 148) is an intense and time intensive process.

Conclusion

At times home is nowhere. At times, one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation. (hooks, 2000 cited in Motasim & Heynen, 2011, p. 64).

This qualitative study has delved into the cascade of emotions and stresses triggered by catastrophic bushfires that wreaked havoc across the State of Victoria on 7 February 2009 (Black Saturday). Loss of meaningful possessions, inclusive of animals, alongside the major shifts and changes within families, the social and natural landscapes were at the core of the primary material. Direct interaction with and perceptions of, the official ‘recovery’ response was found to have significant bearing on the wellbeing of fire-affected residents in the Latrobe Valley, Central Gippsland.

This thesis contributes to the growing body of work that seeks to extend knowledge about the human dimensions of hazard and disaster. Environmental threats are escalating and the Earth is under pressure like never before. Inevitably, major environmental changes and upheaval will “induce new waves of estrangement and displacement” (Clark, 2008, p. 737). Heatwaves in conjunction with drought create ideal conditions for bushfire. In Australia, the most fire-prone continent (Pyne, 1991), the population is growing and rapidly encroaching on the fringe of major cities and regional centres. More people are putting themselves at risk of being affected by bushfires at a time when the length of the fire season, in the southern, south-western and south-eastern regions of the country, has stretched across three of the four conventional seasons (spring, summer and autumn). It is vital that people moving into these flammable terrains are made aware of the emotional, financial and social complications that often unfold after severe or catastrophic bushfire. Whilst we cannot fathom surviving or fleeing bushfire, only those who have direct experience can fully comprehend that reality, we can identify which possessions are irreplaceable and what their destruction might imply.

This Black Saturday narrative inquiry has engaged with the complexities that arise at the micro level in the wake of dispossession and estrangement. The secondary literature that focuses on the sensorial, emotional and embodied facets of home, particularly research on material objects

within intimate domestic spaces, is frequently undertaken within stable environments (see: Pink, 2006; Miller, 2001, 2008 & 2010; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Marcoux, 2001). In this literature (Chapter Two) the mere suggestion of an object being removed from an individual's domestic space is enough to evoke intense emotional responses (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981). I suggest that this anthropological literature – where there is no environmental hazard threatening to destroy or fracture the human/non-human relationship – offers a rich source of insights into the emotional connections between people, home and their possessions. Engaging with writing from the academic disciplines of anthropology and material culture can result in a more sophisticated appreciation of how loss is felt *over time* after bushfire. If the bureaucrats who control budgets and timelines are receptive to learning about the deep and prolonged ramifications of living in or being displaced from a fire-affected landscape, instances of secondary trauma, prolonged and disenfranchised grief could potentially be reduced.

This chapter, and the study as a whole, has provided evidence that words generated at the macro level are inadequate for the purpose of describing the pervasive emotional repercussions of dispossession and devastating loss due to bushfire. The word 'recovery' is loaded with optimistic connotations that can falsely incite the prospect of 'returning to normal'. In addition to this, emotion is missing from the discourse of 'recovery' and disaster more generally. One of the more important components of this work is the engagement with the embodied sensation of *solastalgia*; the concept coined by Albrecht (2005). It has been noted that *solastalgia* was not universal; in this research two female participants, alongside their expressed pain of comprehensive loss, embraced their 'new beginning'. This reinforces the view that a stressful life event, such as a bushfire, is not uniformly traumatic and highlights the need to resist homogenous responses and attitudes within the rigid systems of 'recovery'. A more holistic approach that seeks to better understand and assist, not hinder traumatised people should be the primary goal of the bureaucrats that produce and implement government policy.

The *non-linear* experience of time after bushfire has been a key component of this study. Throughout this work I have delved into, and emphasised the weight of, the subtleties and strains (*grey areas*) that are either obscured or overlooked by the narrow 'recovery' response which is in the main, fixated on structural rebuilding. Measuring need by the absence or presence of houses is a simplistic and flawed approach to determining where to target resources and support. It was widely recognised, by dispossessed and non-displaced participants in this work, that the people who received no or scant assistance were those who chose to defend their homes from embers and flames during the crisis. Inequitable and non-transparent 'recovery' services can

generate or deepen fissures amongst friends, families and neighbours; the stresses ‘that undo’ are magnified. As stated earlier in this discussion, ignoring non-home owning adults is damaging to their future wellbeing and warrants further study. It is worth noting that ‘recovery’ responses need to reflect current demographic realities of disaster-affected communities. Ideally, the ‘recovery’ response, incorporating a ‘welfare check’, would be implemented swiftly and be sustained, at lower levels, over a substantially longer period of time. This extension of time, but not necessarily increased resources, might assist fire or disaster-affected people to transition more smoothly from the medium to longer-term timeframe of the ‘recovery’ process, thus avoiding or reducing feelings of abandonment.

This research has illustrated how Bourdieu’s interpretation of *hysteresis* and Albrecht’s *solastalgia* are two exceptionally useful concepts that resonate powerfully with the Gippsland narratives. These are not words that can gloss over bewildering emotions, imply resolution and nor can they be used arbitrarily. The ‘thinking tools’ of Pierre Bourdieu were instructive in how my interpretations of the twenty-five Gippsland narratives evolved over the course of my candidature. Throughout this thesis, and within this discussion, I have suggested that the lack of recognition of intangible/multisensory losses, by the macro level that controls the ‘recovery’ response, can confuse or prolong the intense grieving process for fire-affected people. We need to collectively engage with unconventional speech, as this qualitative study has done with the work of Albrecht (2005), Bourdieu (1989) and others. There is value in being open to unfamiliar phrases and adopting less rigid definitions of loss and eligibility requirements. Taking a long-term view at the macro level would greatly enhance the wellbeing of fire/disaster-affected people at the micro level. The rush to ‘recover’ illustrated by pledges made by politicians to rebuild ‘brick by brick’, is cruel and counterintuitive.

There are two junctures in the post-disaster space when fire-affected people are particularly vulnerable. When returning to nothing, to view their destroyed home for the first time and when they move back into their newly (re)built structures. A powerful element of the Gippsland narratives was the descriptions of discomfort voiced by participants residing in rebuilt houses and also in purchased properties in town. Their aversion expressed with words such as *sterility* and *unsettledness*, was palpable. This upsetting ambiguity about ‘home’ and their embodied limbo requires deeper examination.

How fire-affected people make meaning from their traumatic circumstances has implications for their future health. Riessman (1989, p. 749) refers to the “stress mess” when she advocates for research to take into account “both the evolving meaning and the evolving health consequences”.

Whilst my research has gleaned insights into, and knowledge about, the complex realities of post-disaster domestic and social spaces, supplementary research into the longitudinal negative and ambivalent feelings that torment individuals who have been dispossessed by disaster is still needed. This research was conducted with the intention of honouring the stories and voices of participants and portraying the essence of their experiences. The qualitative work demonstrates the value of listening to survivors of bushfire and how immersing oneself in the spoken word can enhance understanding about the complicated repercussions that unfold in a post-disaster landscape. Narrative inquiry has been effective in obtaining rich insights into the too frequently overlooked nuances of grief and loss triggered by disaster.

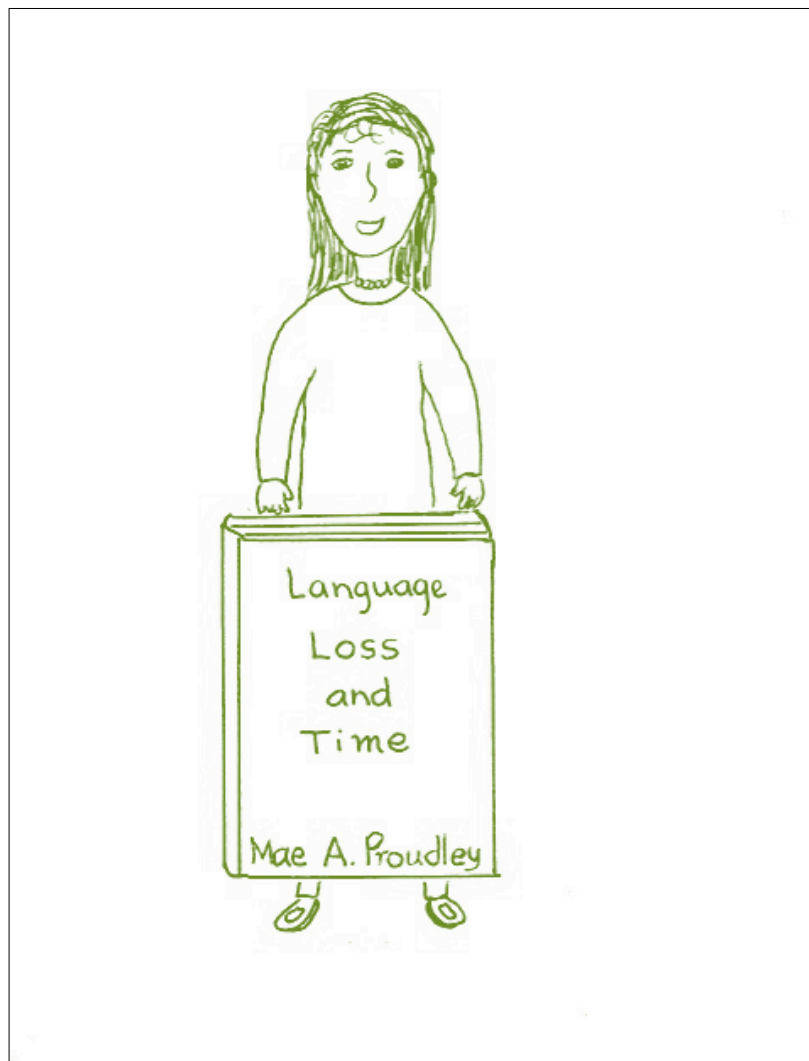


Image 12: Language loss and time.

Appendix A: MUHREC Ethics Approval



MONASH University

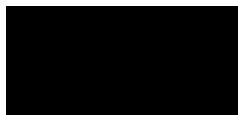
Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC)
Research Office

Human Ethics Certificate of Approval

Date: 4 April 2011
Project Number: CF10/2699 - 2010001522
Project Title: 'It's not like home anymore': people and places in post-disaster decision-making
Chief Investigator: Prof Margaret Alston
Approved: From: 4 April 2010 to 4 April 2016

Terms of approval

1. The Chief investigator is responsible for ensuring that permission letters are obtained, if relevant, and a copy forwarded to MUHREC before any data collection can occur at the specified organisation. **Failure to provide permission letters to MUHREC before data collection commences is in breach of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research and the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research.**
2. Approval is only valid whilst you hold a position at Monash University.
3. It is the responsibility of the Chief Investigator to ensure that all investigators are aware of the terms of approval and to ensure the project is conducted as approved by MUHREC.
4. You should notify MUHREC immediately of any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants or unforeseen events affecting the ethical acceptability of the project.
5. The Explanatory Statement must be on Monash University letterhead and the Monash University complaints clause must contain your project number.
6. **Amendments to the approved project (including changes in personnel):** Requires the submission of a Request for Amendment form to MUHREC and must not begin without written approval from MUHREC. Substantial variations may require a new application.
7. **Future correspondence:** Please quote the project number and project title above in any further correspondence.
8. **Annual reports:** Continued approval of this project is dependent on the submission of an Annual Report. This is determined by the date of your letter of approval.
9. **Final report:** A Final Report should be provided at the conclusion of the project. MUHREC should be notified if the project is discontinued before the expected date of completion.
10. **Monitoring:** Projects may be subject to an audit or any other form of monitoring by MUHREC at any time.
11. **Retention and storage of data:** The Chief Investigator is responsible for the storage and retention of original data pertaining to a project for a minimum period of five years.



Professor Ben Canny
Chair, MUHREC

Cc: Ms Mae Proudley

Postal – Monash University, Vic 3800, Australia



12 377 614 012 CRICOS Provider #00008C

Appendix B: Invitation to participate in the research



Department of Social Work
Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences

GLASS Research Unit

Patron: Her Excellency Ms Quentin Bryce AO, Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia

People and Place in a Post-bushfire Landscape

*To be human is to live in a world that is filled with significant places: to be human is to have and to know **your** place* (Relph, 1986, p. 1).

Mae Proudley is conducting research for a PhD that expands on her earlier bushfire case study, *Fire, Families and Decisions*, which explored how individuals, couples and families responded and coped in the aftermath of the Wangary fire (January 2005, South Australia).

Based at the Gender, Leadership and Social Sustainability (GLASS) Research Unit at Monash University, Mae is conducting exploratory research into the experiences and needs of individuals and families in the wake of the Victorian Black Saturday fires.

Recovery and reconstruction is the least-studied phase of disasters and the primary aim of this research is to learn from the insights of people who have direct and recent experience of bushfire recovery. How do fire affected people purposefully and meaningfully reconstruct their lives?

WHO:

Mae would particularly like to hear from the men and women who survived the Black Saturday fires; how did you navigate your way to where you are today and re-establish your life? The participants would guide the conversation and only discuss what they are comfortable to share. The primary focus is on recovery – what changes have occurred and how have you found healing? What have you learned that might benefit future fire affected people?

WHERE AND WHEN:

Interviews will be conducted throughout April and May 2011. The conversation (at a day and time nominated by the participant), would take approximately 45 minutes in a convenient location.

Your participation and the issues we discuss during the interview will be confidential. Further details will be provided about how your privacy is protected.

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO PARTICIPATE:

If you have been directly affected by the Black Saturday fires and feel comfortable talking about how you have responded and rebuilt your life please contact Mae at mapro5@student.monash.edu or text/phone: 0408 990 174.

Making contact does not commit you to participating – please ask any questions before you decide.

Appendix C: Explanatory statement

Explanatory Statement

10 March 2011

Title: People and Place in a Post Bushfire Landscape

This information sheet is for you to keep.

Student research project

My name is Mae Proudley and I am conducting a research project with Professor Margaret Alston who is the Head of the Department of Social Work at the Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences at Monash University. This research project contributes to my PhD at Monash University. This means that I will be writing a thesis which will be approximately the equivalent of a 300 page book. My PhD is funded by a scholarship from the Gender, Leadership and Social Sustainability (GLASS) Research Unit. Prior to beginning this project I completed a Masters by Research degree at RMIT University. My Masters thesis consisted of a case study of a bushfire. My PhD was funded so that I could build and expand on my Masters thesis, *Fire, Families and Decisions*, which explored (through interviews) how individuals and families responded and coped in the aftermath of the Wangary fire (January 2005) on the Lower Eyre Peninsula in South Australia.

Why did you choose this particular person to participate?

I have not chosen you directly. Someone that you know (possibly a recovery worker or counsellor, family member, neighbour or friend) has given my contact details and information about this project to you. Participation is voluntary and no recruitment is conducted directly with fire-affected people. This project is specifically exploring the experiences of individuals/couples/families directly impacted by the recent fires in Victoria; what changes have occurred since the February 2009 Black Saturday bushfires? What have you learned that might benefit future fire affected people?

The aim/purpose of the research

Recovery and reconstruction is the least-studied phase of disasters and the primary aim of this research is to learn from the insights of people who have direct and recent experience of bushfire recovery. I plan to explore the complex experience of recovery, from the perspective of men and women across different age groups and circumstances, in the aftermath of a bushfire. What do people need, in the immediate, medium and longer term, in the wake of such profound loss? I will also explore how individuals and families make the important and difficult decision of whether to stay and rebuild or relocate to a (possibly) unfamiliar environment. I want to explore how healing from such a traumatic event is linked to the regeneration of the natural landscape and to potentially offer findings for inclusion in recovery and reconstruction policy and procedures for future man-made/natural disasters.

Possible benefits

There are no direct benefits for participants, other than knowing that they have made a useful contribution to a PhD research project. The end result of the PhD might contribute towards enhancing policy on reconstruction and recovery but it is too soon to predict beyond that general statement what the benefit might be to society.

What does the research involve?

The study involves unstructured/open-ended interviews. The primary aim of these interviews is to obtain insights from people who were directly affected by those extreme bushfires – how have you reconstructed your life? I plan to explore how the natural landscape impacts on recovery and the decision-making of individuals/couples/families in the aftermath in relation to rebuilding or relocating. The wider effects on the social landscape – neighbourhood/community relationships, friendships – will also be explored.

How much time will the research take?

I am grateful for you taking the time to meet with me and will be guided by you as to how long we conduct our interview/conversation. A minimum of 45 minutes would be ideal and any time additional to that would be very helpful and appreciated. I am planning on returning to the region in twelve months time to conduct a second, follow up, interview – this is optional. The purpose of the second interview is to capture a more long term perspective (over three years after the fires).

Inconvenience/discomfort

The risk of discomfort is quite high due to the traumatic and sensitive subject matter – the Black Saturday bushfires and how that extreme event impacted on you and your family. This particular research project focuses on loss of home/possessions and loss of connection to place. The two key themes for discussion are the changes in the natural and social landscapes in the wake of the bushfires and how people cope and make decisions in that context. There is very little Australian post disaster research that explores the needs of individuals/couples/families in the short, medium and long term. I am interested to learn about how you navigated your way through the short and medium term recovery process and whether you can anticipate any long term needs or whether you have already identified what they are/might be.

I encourage you to guide the topics that we speak about loosely along the lines of those two key themes. I only want to hear what you are comfortable and willing to share with me so please feel free to change the topic of conversation at any point. If you feel uncomfortable at any time during the interview we can terminate it and, if you consent, I can provide details of services that might be of assistance. In the event that an interviewee experiences discomfort after the interview is over he/she can access a 24-hour telephone support service which is available to anyone needing emotional support - Lifeline: 13 11 14.

The risk that may come from others identifying your participation in this research project is low. Due to the location – I will be conspicuous by not being a local member of the community – it is possible that people might observe who I am meeting with but they will not know what we discuss.

Payment

No payment is offered for your participation in this research project.

Can I withdraw from the research?

Being in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent to participate. If, during the interview, you decide that you would like to terminate the interview and no longer participate I will delete the audio file (if you consented to it being recorded) in your presence. If you decide that you would like to withdraw after the interview is completed then I would delete the audio file of our conversation. Any written documents arising from your interview, such as a part/full transcription or a summary of the content, will be deleted. It should be noted that it is more effective to withdraw early in the process as each interview has an influence on the shape and content of future interviews and, to a lesser extent, the direction of the project.

Confidentiality

I will ask your permission to record our conversation. This will allow me to focus on engaging in the conversation rather than taking hand written notes. Analysis of the interviews will form the core of the PhD thesis but no names will be referred to/used. If I quote from your interview I will use a pseudonym or a code to preserve your anonymity. Your identity will only be known to me, the student, and my supervisor.

Storage of data

Storage of the recorded interview (if you consent to the recording) will adhere to the University regulations and kept on University premises in a locked filing cabinet for 5 years. The audio file of the interview will be saved to a memory stick and stored in a locked drawer or cabinet at the university. I will be the only person who has access to that drawer/cabinet.

Use of data for other purposes

The primary aim of these interviews is to obtain information and insights for the purpose of writing a PhD thesis. Beyond that there are reporting requirements at the Department of Social Work, Monash University so I will need to produce written reports/oral presentations which refer to the interviews. As stated earlier, I will always use pseudonyms in any written material generated by the interviews (including transcriptions and summaries). It is not always possible to guarantee confidentiality but I will make every effort to preserve your anonymity throughout the remainder of the research project.

Results

If you would like to be informed of the progress of this research (which is due to be completed in 2013) please let me know during or after the interview. I, Mae Proudley, can be contacted via email: mapro5@student.monash.edu or you can reach the Gender, Leadership and Social Sustainability (GLASS) Research Unit in the Department of Social Work on: [REDACTED] The website - <http://www.med.monash.edu.au/glass/> - has more information about research projects by GLASS researchers. I am happy to keep you up to date on my progress via email or regular post and hope that you might allow me to recontact you, in approximately twelve months time for a second interview.

<p>If you would like to contact the researchers about any aspect of this study, please contact the Chief Investigator:</p>	<p>If you have a complaint concerning the manner in which this research (Project Number: CF10/2699 – 2010001522) is being conducted, please contact:</p>
<p>Prof. Margaret Alston Head Social Work Department Monash University</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED] [REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p>	<p>Executive Officer, Human Research Ethics Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC)</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED] [REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p>

Thank you,

Mae Proudley.

Appendix D: Participant details

Interview	Pseudonym	Location (prior to and after bushfire)	Housing Tenure	Notes
1 84 mins	Gordon & Julia Age: 60s, 2 adult kids & Grandchildren	Callignee South 10 acres 32 years	Home Owner	Home Intact – female initially home alone, he returned for active defence. Wind/fire changed direction.
2 65 mins	Alan & Jackie Age: 60s, 2 adult kids	Loy Yang Park Estate Home: 20 years 2 & a half acres	Home Owner	Home Intact – stayed to actively defend. Anticipated fire – well prepared.
3 72 mins	Paul Age: early 40s 3 children Full time carer to infant son.	Loy Yang Park Estate Home: 14yrs	Home Owner, mortgage	Returned to Nothing. Left. Rebuilt. Multiple temporary moves. Easy decision to rebuild but regretted once he moved into new building. **[has since sold property]
4 90 mins	Graham Age: 60 Adult kids & Grandchild	Callignee 220 acres Home: 33 years on property.	Home Owner	Home Damaged. Active defence – stayed with son. Nearly perished. 14km fencing burnt + other losses (shed/contents of shed, rental property, and garden).
5 58 mins	Hanna Age: early 30s 2 children under 3 yrs.	Callignee, 6 acres. 6 months after moving to Callignee fires burnt them out.	Home Owner, mortgage	Returned to Nothing. Absent during fires – in Melbourne. Rebuilt on same block. Multiple temporary moves. Easy decision to rebuild. Very stressful.
6 90 mins	Kristina Age: late 40s. 2 older kids (18 & 22). Born in Netherlands.	Loy Yang Park Estate since 2002, approx. 2 acres.	Home Owner	Returned to Nothing. Left with items. Rebuilt – easy decision. 3 moves – 2 brief stays (days) & 1 rental property for months until new house was ready.

7 54 mins	Cass Age: early 50s Kids: 15 & 21yrs	Lived: Callignee on 11 acres Losses: “totally everything.” Now lives: Traralgon.	Home Owner	Returned to Nothing. Left with a few items. Purchased house in Traralgon Still owns 11 acres Difficult decision (tension within family). Very unhappy in Traralgon.
8 110 mins	Jude Age: 60s Adult kids & Grandchildren	Was: Loy Yang Park Estate for 10 years on 2 & a half acres. Now Lives: Traralgon.	Home Owner	Returned to Nothing Left with a few items. Purchased house in Traralgon, June 2009. Unhappy so sold that and purchased 2 nd time in Traralgon. Sold vacant block on Estate. Unsettled.
9 88 mins	Wendy Age: 40s 3 kids	Traralgon South, suburban size block.	Home Owner	Home Intact. Left. Not affected/no losses. Very active in the recovery.
10 43 mins	Robyn Age: 50s 2 adult kids	Callignee – for 26 years in various locations. Current block on a few acres.	Home Owner, mortgage	Returned to Nothing. Left with minimal items. Living in a shed & rebuilding on block. Easy decision.
11 150 mins	Karen Age: 40s 19 & 20 yr old children	Loy Yang Park Estate: 13 yrs 2 acres.	Home Owner	Home Intact. Grounds, sheds & outdoor areas damaged. Left with a lot of possessions. Couple Divided. He wanted to relocate after fires – she wanted to stay. Unique perspective.
12 98 mins	Lisa Age: 40s Primary age daughter – 7 or 8.	Red Hill Road 5 years on 5 acres (sub division of farm)	Home Owner	Returned to Nothing. Left with a lot of items. Rebuilt – advertised ‘For Sale’ at time of interview. Well insured. Couple divided. He didn’t want to rebuild, she did.
13 60 mins	Colin Age: 57 2 adult kids Husband of Robyn.	Callignee In area since 1984 (different answer to wife). On few acres since 2003.	Home Owner, mortgage.	Returned to Nothing. Left with minimal items. Living in a shed & rebuilding on block. Easy decision to rebuild. Would build smaller in retrospect.

14 107 mins	Kate & Neve Age: 50s & late 20s Mother & Daughter 3 children & 3 Grandchildren (Kate)	Loy Yang Park Estate: 23 years 2 & a half acres	Home Owner	Returned to Nothing Absent during fires (in Melbourne). Rented in town – Traralgon. Rebuilt on block. Easy decision to rebuild, couple united.
15 125 mins	Harley & Lorna Age: 70 & late 60s	Callignee – 5 acres or so moved there in 2000. After fires: Traralgon on suburban block	Home Owner	Returned to Nothing. Sold Block. Bought in Traralgon. Full payout/well insured. Easy decision to relocate.
16 81 mins	Pete Age: 63 2 adult children. 1 grandchild	Callignee 16 acres for 33 years Used to breed/export goats.	Home Owner Purchased land when he was 30 years old. Built home himself.	Returned to Nothing Stayed to actively defend. Nearly perished. Living in a shed – self built. Has evolved into a home. Uninsured. Strong bond with land – easy decision to stay.
17 65 mins	Carmen Age: late 40s/early 50s. 2 daughters – high school & university age.	Koornalla. Purchased 2 & a half acres in 1984.	Home Owner Self built – mud brick house.	Home Intact. Plan was to stay & defend. On the day she & 2 daughters left. Adults (husband/father and other family) stayed to actively defend. Losses: sheds & contents, garden.
18 69 mins	Reuben Age: 40s 3 young children (4, 6, 8)	Loy Yang Estate Moved from Tasmania in 2003. 2 acres	Home Owner	Home Intact Damage to carport & external grounds. Family evacuated 30 minutes after learning of the fire from neighbour. Stuck to the plan: Leave.
19 100 mins	Leon & Irena Age: late 60s Adult children Grandchildren. Irena: born in Germany	Callignee 10 acres Since 1983	Home Owner	Returned to Nothing During fire – he wanted to leave, she didn't (didn't believe threat). Still own block. Bought house in Traralgon. Plan to live separately. Tension.

20 95 mins	Erik & Marilyn Age: 67 & 60. Adult children Grandchildren.	Callignee 6 & a half acres 35+ years	Home Owner	Returned to Nothing. Wife left early. He left late – at home with future son in law. Rebuilt. Lived in town for one year & then in a shed for one year. Moved into new home December 2010.
21 80 mins	Claire Age: Mid/late 40s 3 daughters Oldest 17yrs.	Loy Yang Park Estate 2 and a half acres 17 years	Home Owner	Home Intact All left. House survived.
22 95 mins	Elyse Age: 28	Callignee since 18 months of age. Grew up in rental accommodation throughout local area.	At time of fire, living at home with parents.	Returned to Nothing Parents living in shed whilst undertaking the rebuilding. Living with brother in Traralgon South. Life 'on hold.' Not a home owner/renter.
23 93 mins	Sandra & Malcolm Age: 50s. 3 adult children	Callignee 115 acres across 2 sites Since 1981. Originally on 10 acres. Expanded. In current home: 4 and a half years.	Home Owner	Home Intact Woman was home alone & left (was retrieved), husband was absent & couldn't return to property. House survived. Extensive losses: Livestock, Feed, Fencing, Tractor, Machinery & other farm related items.
24 80 mins	Adam Age: 31 Son of Graham	Callignee Attended local primary school for 2 years then visited Callignee on weekends.	Building a home on family farm at time of interview. Was living with parents at time of fire.	Home damaged. Reluctantly stayed with father to actively defend. Nearly perished. Extensive damage to property. Loss of livestock very painful.

25 75 mins	Len & Kay Age: mid/late 60s.	Callignee Home: 37 years. 500 acres Largest landholder & most remote property	Home Owner. 2 other homes on their land. Son's house caught fire – children present.	Home Intact He & wife left in separate cars. Got disoriented – poor visibility. Nearly perished. Extensive losses: 7 or 8 tractors, fencing, livestock, feed, machinery, shedding, farming tools/infrastructure.
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Total recorded time: 35 hours and 45 minutes

Total Number of Participants: 33

Men: 13

Women: 20

Home Destroyed: 14

Home Intact: 9

Home Damaged: 2

At home during fire: 7 – 5 males, 2 females

Fled fire: 22 – 7 males, 15 females

Absent: 4 – 1 male, 3 females

Number of couples interviewed together: 7

Number of couples interviewed separately: 1

Age Range: 28 - early 70s.

Nationalities: Netherlands (1), Germany (1), Poland (1), Scotland (1), Anglo Australian (29)

No Indigenous representation in sample

Large Landholders: 4

Locations: Callignee, Callignee South, Koornalla, Traralgon and Traralgon South,

Appendix E: Sample of interview coding

Identifying Emerging Themes:

Running time = 54 minutes

Who:	<p>Interview Seven:</p> <p>Female: 50s, married.</p> <p>Two daughters (aged 21 & 15 at the time of the fires).</p> <p>Lived on 11 acres in Callignee.</p> <p>Losses: “<u>totally everything.</u>”</p> <p>Still own the 11 acres.</p> <p>Four moves after the fires.</p> <p>Bought a place in Traralgon – where they currently live – have been living there for just over a year.</p> <p>She is very unhappy living in Traralgon. Husband unwilling to return to their land in Callignee – won’t rebuild. She has plans drawn up but sounds resigned to being stuck in an urban environment.</p>	<p>Comments:</p> <p>This interview was conducted in a cafe – such a shame (awful background noise/acoustics/privacy concerns) - but I feel fortunate to have met and recorded this woman’s insights & reflections.</p> <p>It was, at the time, the most emotional interview & yet there is laughter.</p> <p>I admired her willingness to talk considering how painful it is to discuss the event and the stresses/changes that unfolded in the aftermath.</p> <p>Tension – about the decision to buy in Traralgon. In order to keep her family intact she has had to compromise.</p>
Home:	<p>Me: <i>Do you still feel quite connected to that land, or is it hard to be when you’re not living there?</i></p> <p>“It’s hard when you’re not living there, and of course <u>you don’t have the contact with the people so much anymore because you’re not out there</u>, and I suppose we’ve always worked, but as I say, I would like to go back because of the peace and quiet, and I did enjoy it when it was but you know” (p. 14).</p> <p>I know a lot of people who aren’t moving back. A lot of people who</p>	<p>Living in town – she is socially isolated from other fire affected people.</p> <p>When it was? I sometimes had difficulty hearing in the setting we were in and there are loose threads as</p>

	<p>have already sold, who <u>could not even come back to even look at their property.</u></p> <p>I know of others that have built and <u>have only been there for three to four months. Can't handle it, and they're selling.</u></p> <p><i>Me: Is that, do you think, because when they get there it's not their home, it's just an alien environment?</i></p> <p>Yeah, and that's how I feel still about this house. It's a house, it's not my home.</p> <p><i>Because you don't have all that history and...</i></p> <p>And because we originally built our house. We designed it, we built it, <u>we were owner builders and we built it.</u></p> <p><i>That makes it more meaningful doesn't it?</i></p> <p>See my dad's a carpenter, so he did a lot of woodwork inside the house, and my uncle and cousin, they were builders and they built it, yeah, so it was..." (p. 18).</p> <p>"We had to go and get this BAL fire thing, and ours has got the lowest rating, we could near enough build a cardboard house on the block. It's just unreal, and <i>we can't work it out. Can't work it out.</i> As I said, it's just so sad" (p. 20).</p>	<p>a result – this is one of them.</p> <p>Knows of people in all different scenarios – rebuilding/not rebuilding, selling after rebuilding and so on.</p> <p>Personal input into building their home – makes it more meaningful (it wasn't a kit home or built by someone else) – this was also raised in Interview 5 ('blood, sweat and tears').</p> <p>She mentions several times throughout the interview how the house was brick and surrounded by paving – <u>cannot comprehend how it burned</u> (including the slab). Still sounds – over 2 + years after the fires - incredulous. You can actually hear it in her tone of voice.</p>
Day of the fire:	<p>"We were home. We got the two daughters out first because the eldest daughter we had just bought her a car for her birthday, because it was her 21st birthday, so we presented her with a</p>	

	<p>car, and I mean, just as a new driver we thought maybe she might get a bit panicky with so much traffic on the road or whatever, and we were going down to my mother's place for tea so we said in the afternoon, 'Look, why don't you and [your sister] go off down to Nanny's now. Just take you jarmies because I think we might be staying there the night.' <u>That was all, that's all they took, that's all they came with, so yeah</u> (p. 2).</p> <p>"I just – really, really quite amazing." Me: <i>So you wouldn't have had any time to really...</i></p> <p>"No, we didn't. [Her husband] had gone back down to Traralgon South at 20 past, and I mean we don't live far from Traralgon South, and he came back up and they said to him, 'What the hell are you doing here?' quite frankly, so he said that they were about to block and stop everybody, you know, so he came straight back home. At 6.35pm we were driving out the driveway, the pair of us. I had packed the <u>dog in the car and the bird</u>, at that stage, put them back inside the car. I was choking because I had inhaled that much smoke then, because the smoke had just then come around the house. My neighbour whose house was exploding ran to their dam – he calls me Kiddo, and he said, 'Sorry Kiddo, our house was exploding and we looked up and your house was burning to the ground', and it was gone by a quarter to seven"</p> <p><u>Now, we had a great big brick home with seven foot verandas all the way around it.</u></p> <p>Me: <i>The intensity of it.</i></p>	<p>Daughters were sent to their grandparents – sound like they left early. I should have clarified the timing.</p> <p>This is the disbelief I mentioned on the previous page.</p> <p>Welfare of domestic pets.</p> <p>They didn't live in a wooden house surrounded by tress/bush.</p>
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	<p>“The intensity. No trees, we never had any trees, it was clear all the way around, and it makes you angry because you had this beautiful brick home with sprinklers and what not and everything, and then what gets left on your property – I mean as I said to you, there was not even the slab left. The shed had gone, everything had gone. The poly water tank is still standing with not even a mark on it.” (p. 10).</p> <p>We were talking about possessions (see p. 12 below) when she said:</p> <p><u>“I didn’t expect the house to be gone. I didn’t expect the house to be gone”</u></p> <p>Me: <i>So when you left you were thinking...</i></p> <p>“Well the house was still standing then, there was no fire around, just the smoke. From when we jumped into the cars, the noise had stopped, but the smoke was there, and then as we got to the top of the driveway <u>it was like a freight train coming through</u>” (p. 11).</p> <p>Me: <i>Could you get back to see what had happened, whether your house was there?</i></p> <p>“No, we got told.”</p> <p>Me: <i>You were told by your neighbour?</i></p> <p>“Yeah. And you still don’t believe it.”</p> <p>Me: <i>Did you have to see it for yourself?</i></p> <p>“Yeah, you don’t believe it. When he said – because we saw him at the Red Cross centre, when we all had to sign in on the Sunday, and he’s telling you, <u>but you’re not believing it</u>, you know, how can you just...” (p. 11/12)</p>	<p>ANGER. [but no mention of arson]</p> <p>I’ve duplicated this in the ‘Possessions’ code – worth having here – the 8 words repeated.</p> <p>Left late – there were no visible flames. She thought/held onto the belief that their house survived.</p> <p>The day after the fires they were told by a neighbour their house had gone.</p>
Displaced:	<p>“My husband’s firm had a unit and we stayed in that for a while, and then to</p>	<p>Moved four times. 2 different units (through her</p>

<p>Mum's place" (whilst they were on holiday in Qld).</p> <p>When I said that was a lot of moving she replied:</p> <p><u>"You didn't have anything did you.</u></p> <p>You know, there wasn't a great deal of furniture and stuff that you had, so it was pack them up in a couple of boxes and you're gone" (p. 3).</p> <p>I asked:</p> <p><i>Was it hard to get your routines back on track?</i></p> <p>"No, well that's why we bought the house, because [their oldest daughter] was in the last year of university and [their youngest daughter] was at school, and <u>we want some sort of normality for the children</u>, so hence why we did in the end decide to buy, <u>to make them feel happy and secure</u>" (p. 3)</p> <p>Me: <i>It would be hard, because you've brought up your family there. It would be hard to let go of that.</i></p> <p>And I want to move back, but [her husband's] not keen on moving back. <u>At this stage he's still having troubles, yeah.</u></p> <p><i>Not ready?</i></p> <p>No. Not ready at all. (p. 4)</p> <p>After she returned from NZ (on p. 12):</p> <p>"And that was when we had moved back to Mum's place then, so [her youngest daughter] and I were at Mum's, [the older daughter] was at uni, [her husband] was in Shepparton, and then [her husband], his transfer had finished and he was back in Traralgon when Mum and Dad went to</p>	<p>husband's work), then her parents home (whilst they were on holiday) and then the present house which they bought in Traralgon.</p> <p>[this was mentioned by Interviewee 5 – having so little to move].</p> <p>NORMALITY:</p> <p>The motivation to buy in Traralgon was the children – their need for stability/routine.</p> <p>But she is not happy in town....her oldest doesn't live at home (not full time) and her youngest prefers Callignee. Complexity of family decision-making (I don't have her husband's perspective).</p> <p>This overlaps with 'Mental Health.' Is the word 'troubles' a euphemism for mental health/psychological state?</p> <p>It is not easy to follow all their moves/ins/outs/travel/work changes post fire. It was a very disruptive time for the family.</p>
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	<p>Queensland, so it sort of worked okay.”</p> <p>Me: <i>What change and moving.</i></p> <p>“<u>It was. It was horrible.</u> And then we had started looking for a house, because we knew that when Mum and Dad came back we all couldn’t be there, and do we rent?, do we build a shed out there?, what do you do? We had gone through all that and we decided well the kids needed normality. [Her husband] was looking at being transferred again, and he didn’t want us to be out there by ourselves in a shed, he said, ‘Because you don’t know what goes on’, <u>and to be the heat of summer coming up again,</u> he didn’t want that to happen, so then there was the toss up of renting or buying. We weren’t getting any rent assistance or anything, and so we decided to – and both of us have the same attitude whereas money and rent comes, we think that, ‘Well rent’s just dead money,’ but if we buy it then at least we can sell it in the long run, and have something back, so we had been searching as I say, for a while, and then we finally decided on this house that we’ve got now, and then <u>he was transferred to Kakadu</u> (laughter).</p> <p>So yeah, and in between the time, as I said, [her youngest daughter] with glandular fever, yeah so...(laughter)” (p. 16).</p>	<p>Describes the thinking behind the decision to buy in Traralgon. [this is where age factors in]</p> <p>I should have picked up on this and asked about future fire risk (if they had decided to rebuild) – another lost thread.</p> <p>Both united – the husband/wife – in not wanting to rent.</p> <p>Stress induced illness in her daughters.</p>
Decision-making:	<p>ME: <i>I mean that’s probably a bit personal but I am interested in – because I’ve encountered some people where both the man and the woman, they were ready to rebuild and then you’ve got ones where one’s ready and one’s not, and how do you navigate</i></p>	

	<p><i>that, but I guess you just have to be patient and one of you has to compromise and that's how it goes.</i></p> <p>“That’s it. I mean I want to go back and <u>I’ve got a design of the house that I want, straight away we did that, but [her husband] is not ready to go back.</u> And I think I suppose, we’re looking at – well the kids are – [the older daughter] has grown up and [the youngest] is in her last couple of years at high school, so she might move soon, so whether we go back out there. It’s those sort of things” (p. 5).</p>	<p>She wants to move back, he doesn’t.</p>
Urban living:	<p>Me: <i>What is it like living in an environment where</i></p> <p>Horrible. (laughter)</p> <p>Me: <i>It’s horrible?</i></p> <p>Living in town. Horrible.</p> <p>Me: <i>Obviously you’re missing the landscape?</i></p> <p>“Yeah. You’ve got neighbours, and your poor dog’s nearly going mental, it’s barking at everybody that goes past, because we had no cats or anything. You’ve got all these horrible cats all around the place. No birdlife – we had lots of birds and we used to feed our Rosellas and we would have Rainbow Lorikeets that would come and tap on our window and they would bring their young around to show us their young, and the Kookaburras that were always out there, and you just miss all that”</p> <p>“The animal life and the peace and the quiet, you know. I mean don’t get me wrong, the house that we’ve got is a lovely house and it’s on a double block, so it’s quite big and at the back of us we’ve got paddocks to give us</p>	<p>I hadn’t completed my question – she leapt in with the word ‘horrible.’ Passionate about how much she hates living in an urban environment. The word shot out like a rocket.</p> <p>I had a separate ‘wildlife’ code but it’s too tricky to separate it out.</p> <p>Culture shock of urban living.</p>

	<p>that little bit of space, but it's this traffic continually, and you hear the neighbours talking out in their yard. The bloke next door is a hotrod driver and its rev, rev, rev, and then of course, his mates all come around on the weekend with their cars" (p. 5).</p> <p>Me: <i>So is it reassuring to know that it's temporary - it's not for the long term? Does that help you?</i></p> <p>"No, because I think it will be for long term. <u>Even though I want to move back out, I can't see us doing it, so it's very hard to take, but what do you do? I don't want to just move out there and leave my husband because he wants to stay in. I mean we're a family unit, so we just have to make some compromises, both of us</u>" (p. 6).</p> <p>I asked how her daughters felt about living in town:</p> <p>"The youngest one wants to move back out. The eldest one, she doesn't care because sometimes she'll be here, sometimes she'll be in Melbourne with her boyfriend you know, so..." (p. 7)</p>	<p>It's a long term living arrangement.</p> <p>Is she resigned to living in Traralgon permanently?</p> <p>I'm not clear what compromise her husband has made – maybe it is in a different area of life not related to the location of their home? [maybe it is not selling the land or delaying/postponing selling?]</p>
Age:	<p>Me: <i>But does he enjoy this environment, does he prefer it?</i></p> <p>"I think so. I think he is. I think it's because if we go back out again, as I say, we've got to rebuild. Okay, fair enough, you get over that hurdle, but you're at that age that yeah, we've got to go for a home loan again and going through all that, then it's looking after 11 acres, you know, and you sort of think, 'Well, if it was two acres or one acre, it's a different story', but we've got 11, so you sort of – and the getting the wood for the fire, and ..." (p. 6).</p>	<p>It sounds like age – where they are in the life cycle – is a major factor in the husband's decision not to rebuild on the 11 acres in Callignee. I probably should have asked more about the 'troubles.'</p> <p>Forecasting into the future – 11 acres will be too difficult to maintain.</p>

<p>“Well, even if we stayed in town I will build in town somewhere else, and if we got a block of land and built our own house, that might be alright, but we might not find as big a block as what we’ve got because they all seem to be very small blocks of land nowadays. So we thought, Well, the house we’ve got is quite a nice house, and it’s fairly new, it’s not an old house, it’s a new house, but we’re going to build a big outdoor entertainment area and maybe one day – the one day, we might put a swimming pool in. The thing I miss the most is a pantry, and this house doesn’t have a pantry. It’s got a very, very tiny kitchen, it’s sort of not a family kitchen if you could think about – the oven’s so small, you can’t put a big – and I used to cook, so...” (p. 6)</p> <p>Me: <i>So do you think where you are, in terms of the life cycle, in terms of age, do you think it’s different decisions for different age groups?</i></p> <p>“Yeah, you get to the stage where you should be looking at more like, <u>in X amount of years, we might be retiring, and we go through all this again and all this stress again, and just before we retire, you know, and we’ve got rebuild everything back up to when we retire if we stay where we are, we’re sort of half way there</u>” (p. 7)</p> <p>Me: <i>so you’ve got different things to take into consideration than someone in their twenties or thirties?</i></p> <p>“I mean they can go through the home loan, rebuild and start off, whereas us, we haven’t got that 25 years on a home loan” (p. 7).</p>	<p>So if they remain in town it will be in a different house. It all sounds a bit up in the air....where ‘home’ is/can be/might be. Are they still searching for where home might be?</p> <p>They have thought of every scenario and it sounds unresolved.</p> <p>Past tense – cooking – this is something that comes up in a future interviews. Where after the fires participants stated how hard they find it to cook (partly it is to do with having no cook books). Will keep track of this as I continue with the coding – I like unanticipated themes, often simple or domestic in nature, that surface.</p> <p>Retirement looming – not a good time to take on a mortgage.</p> <p>Age/time a major factor in deciding whether to rebuild and where to rebuild.</p>
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Hard:	<p>I asked: <i>Is it hard being amongst people who might have no understanding or comprehension of what you've been through?</i></p> <p>“Yeah, very much. Very much because you'll get people that will – even in conversations you weren't supposed to hear or that they forgot that you were part of that, that within the first months, <u>‘I'm so sick and tired of hearing about these people have got nothing’</u> and I think, ‘Well, go through it, and see what it's like, you know’ (p. 8).</p> <p>“Yeah, and it was a little bit hard to take, and I still – even still now, we're having great difficulty. You still go to get something and it's not there” (p. 8).</p>	<p>Lack of understanding – living away from the bushfire affected area – is difficult.</p> <p>So soon after the fires people are tired of hearing about them. She is removed from the fire affected area and yet Traralgon, the town, is not that far away. Proximity to the fires has no influence over levels of sympathy/empathy/compassion..... There is an ignorance of what people are facing so close to the fire ground.</p> <p>This overlaps with ‘Possessions’ – hard to separate the codes out during a sequence of speech – the lack of understanding about the long term impacts comes through strongly.</p>
Returning to Nothing:	<p>“And then somebody else had said that they had passed and ‘No, it wasn't,’ you know, and even when Greg rang back on the phone to Mum's place, because we were sort of staying at Mum's, <u>I was crying but you're still saying, ‘I know it will be there.’</u> You have to see it for yourself, and when you're finally allowed to get out there too, because they then had to have the police enquiry to make sure that there was no bodies in the houses and things like that, each property checked, and then you were allowed to get out there, and all we did was pull up – I had a seat up the top of my driveway because we were trying to make a roundabout, and it was really lovely because it was a higher level than the house, <u>so I had this lovely little seat that I could look</u></p>	<p>This code – ‘returning to nothing’ – is inspired by Read (2009).</p> <p>Not able to believe it until she had seen it for herself (that her house was gone). Held onto hope?</p> <p>The time lag – stressful – unable to see it until the officials gave the green light.</p>

	<p><u>over the whole valley and up to Red Hill Road, and through the top and everything, and I just sat there and cried, just overlooking everything, and it's just, yeah. I constantly cried for days on end.</u>" (p. 12).</p> <p>"Yeah, mainly Mum and Dad, and I think [her older daughter] was at uni that – for the first time, and yeah we went out there, and Mum and Dad, and we just cried and Mum and Dad cried as well. We all just stood there in shock and horror, you know, <u>because as I said, we could see everybody all around, and everyone's gone. So it was just, 'Yeah, such and such lived over there, whoever it was over there. That one's gone as well.'</u> It was just really devastating, and as I said, maybe because of our view that we always took in and beautiful, and I mean really to anybody else new coming into the area and looking at it, it's a beautiful view, but <u>it's just that we know how many people were there, and some are coming back and some aren't. Maybe when they come back, or whoever comes back and builds, maybe we'll feel a bit better, yeah.</u></p>	<p>Shock/despair – extreme emotions after profound loss.</p> <p>She's described how they all – 3 generations - responded to seeing the destruction.</p>
Case manager:	<p>Had one [Adrian] for 12 months.</p> <p>"..he was really good...he was worried about us" (p. 1).</p> <p>"Look, I wasn't going to. I wasn't going to have a case manager at all. We just wanted to deal with everything by ourselves, <u>but because we were in town and we weren't out there, we were missing out on everything. We weren't getting any of the Traralgon South thing, it was open at this time and that time, and we weren't getting any help there at the start.</u></p>	<p>First & only mention of Traralgon South (where the recovery was based/focused) – the division that many other participants spoke at length or in more detail about.</p>

	<p>Anything that came through on the government was all going to our address out there, well you know, I mean when your internet's gone, when your phone's gone, everything's gone, well how can you - and nobody else was passing any information on.</p> <p>Me: <i>So you were in a bit of a communication black hole?</i></p> <p>We were in a black hole, yeah exactly. So then we decided, because everybody was saying, 'Well, have you got this? Have you – you know we've gone and got this thing, and we've got this bit of grant to help us get our winter clothes' and things like that. 'No, know nothing about that one. Haven't heard anything about that.' So then we decided, 'That's it.' <u>We'd had enough.</u></p>	<p>No or inadequate information – was this common amongst those who were displaced and living outside the fire affected/recovery area?</p> <p>Wasn't until they reached this point – their limit of no or too little information - that they accessed a case manager. How did people apply/access a case manager? Was it offered or did they have to actively seek it out?</p>
Mental Health:	<p>"I mean we didn't go for any counselling at the start. Sometimes I think yeah that was all right, and other times I think, 'No. The two daughters should have went and had counselling.' But it's just like – well last year [2010] we were getting very, very depressed, very, very depressed about it all, and my cousin who goes overseas quite a lot said, 'Come on a holiday with us.' So we, 'oh yeah, do we, don't we?' you know, and she had managed to get a very, very cheap deal, so we decided to go with them. It was the tonic we needed, it was such a pick me up, it was unbelievable, which was absolutely wonderful. We laughed and talked. I've had the girls sick, both of them have been sick with stress and everything, so I've had [the youngest daughter] the</p>	<p>Talked about the physical/psychological impacts of the fire.</p> <p>Travel – removing themselves from the environment – proved to be a significant help.</p> <p>This is the neglected demographic –</p>

	<p>first year, <u>five doses of glandular fever brought on by the stress of the fire.</u> <u>[Their older daughter] was quite stressed,</u> but she was down there at uni, so I wasn't watching her as much.</p> <p>"Yeah, we had a bad year that year. I lost my best girlfriend in a couple of months after it [the February 2009 fires] – died of cancer, and that was such a shock to us" (p. 8).</p> <p>"So I went in to work and I said, 'I've got to take this holiday earlier than what I expected' and I flew over there, so I was in the Invercargill hospital. I arrived there on the Saturday at 12.30, and 2.30 I was at the Invercargill hospital with her for the next three weeks, and then she passed away, <u>so I lost my best girlfriend and get back here to Traralgon, we were only home for week and [her husband] was transferred to Shepparton.</u></p>	<p>those that aren't children but are not yet fully independent adults.</p> <p>This is the first mention of her friend dying soon after the fires – she returns to this later.</p> <p>A huge amount of upheaval after the fires.</p> <p>They, the couple, had booked & paid for a holiday in NZ. Their friends, from Scotland, were to join them – then the fires happened so they decided not to go. When she knew her friend was ill in NZ the interviewee ended up going over to see her friend for the last time.</p>
Possessions :	<p>Me: <i>Because you've had the experience of losing everything do you have a different relationship now with possessions?</i></p> <p>Yes, it was quite funny first off, when I was running out of the house there was three items of clothing on the clothes line – <u>I've been in trouble ever since, you see, because it was my husband's work shirt, my work shirt and my daughter's school uniform, and of course, she goes back to school – she said, 'Of all the things in the world Mum, to grab, why did you grab my school uniform?'</u> I said, 'I don't know, <u>it was dark and you just...</u></p> <p>Me: <i>You were in survival mode...</i></p> <p>"Yeah exactly. I said, 'Even when I was running out of the house there was</p>	<p>Talked about items she grabbed before fleeing the fire – I failed to clarify what the item with the handle was and (reading/hearing it now) she didn't answer the question (about possessions and her relationship with them in the present – after profound/complete loss).</p>

	<p>something there on the table, it had a handle on it, I just took it,' and I said, 'It was nothing important, but I grabbed it'" (p. 9).</p> <p><u>"Just how cruel can life be.</u> So yeah, and nothing else. Just everything obliterated. We did pottery and my kiln - you couldn't even recognise my kiln. I had antiques, I had crystal. We had special friends from Scotland and whenever they came over – he was the chief engineer of the whisky distilleries – he would always bring two whiskies over, one for drinking for when they started drinking and one antique whisky, so that was always put down, you know. So lost all those, lost all my special crystals, and now I've lost my girlfriend and the things that she had bought me, they're all gone as well.</p> <p>And I even had two paintings by Terry Peterson, who is an artist from Omeo. When I bought them they weren't a great deal, but over the years, of course, you know the price of oil paintings and everything goes up and they were worth quite a lot of money – he's not painting anymore, so I'm not going to be able to replace those. I mean that's just a little thing, you know.</p> <p>And of course, we had cathedral ceilings and of course they were up the top, and I just sort of looked at them and I thought – well I didn't expect the house to be gone. I didn't expect the house to be gone" (p. 11).</p>	<p>Sentimental, valuable & irreplaceable items.</p> <p>Expecting the house to be there when they returned might explain why she took the work shirts/school uniform?</p>
Landscape:	<p>Me: <i>That landscape must have been very confronting?</i></p> <p><u>"It was. It was the shock. If you didn't know that it was a fire, you would</u></p>	

	<p><u>think it was snow because there was so much ash on the ground going up, that it was just white.</u> I mean the trees with smoke still coming out everywhere, but it was so white from the ash, and then you get up to our property and you look through, because we had a creek down the bottom of the property and that was the only sort of tree line that we had, a long way away, <u>and it's see through...</u></p> <p><u>...and you could see the other side and everything, it was just see through,</u> and of course the little creek was really a spring but a creek in winter time, and it was – all the peat was burning and that just burnt off, and now it's a great big gouge, an ugly gouge, because they've let two neighbours further up, dam it (p. 12).</p> <p>I asked if it helped to see the re-greening:</p> <p><u>"No, no that didn't,</u> because after a month or so, you know, a month, two months. When we sort of managed to get back out there again to have a look, I was so excited because there was all these little green sprouts coming up all over the ground, so I would go down and as I went more and more, and I'm looking at them more and more – blackberry had come up, and I mean we had got rid of the blackberry and now there was all this blackberry come up, and we're still finding blackberry. (Laughter) <u>So no, the greenness to start off with wasn't very nice</u> (p. 13).</p> <p>"I had, when we originally brought the property, I had planted some fruit trees down the driveway, a beautiful big quince tree, almond tree and something else, and when the people came in to</p>	<p>Exposure – denuded.</p>
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	<p>clear the property, Grocon had come in to clear, they had asked [her husband] that between us and the other neighbour down the driveway, if they could cut some branches on the other trees, on the big trees, and [her husband] said, ‘Yeah,’ you know, to get in. I turn up there – when I turned up and they were finished, that they had ploughed all my garden down and took my trees down that were okay. So they had all gone as well.</p> <p>They left the other trees, didn’t cut any branches off them, just ploughed down the others, the fruit, yeah.</p> <p><i>That’s another part of your loss, isn’t it?</i></p> <p>Exactly, yeah. I mean your original tree that you plant – you know how you get in your new house or whatever...</p> <p><i>Well you’ve watched it grow.</i></p> <p>Yeah, exactly.</p> <p>So you know, it was just disappointment after disappointment after disappointment, you know” (p. 13/14)</p>	<p>Grocon – who cleared the property – destroyed some of her surviving trees.</p> <p>Even after the fires the loss continues with the lack of communication/care with the clearing of the debris/burnt out properties.</p> <p>This experience is not unique – others shared similar anecdotes of what happened to their properties/gardens after the fires. It has been described as a second trauma.</p>
Work:	<p>I went back to work the first day.</p> <p><i>Did you? Was that to get back into a structured environment?</i></p> <p>“Yeah. Yes. We wanted things to be back, and structure as what we could, and of course [their youngest daughter] had her school uniform so she was back on the Monday, so she was back at school, which helped her in that way to be with her friends, and well [their older daughter] had restarted – hadn’t quite restarted uni, but she was – I think she went back down to</p>	

	<p>Melbourne to setup back at uni. [Her husband] had gone back to work straight away, because he'd stopped because things were going on at work, so he had gone back there as well, and it was me, and it was either, 'Okay, what do I do? Do I go back to work or do I sit here at my mother's table in the kitchen?' She's at work, Dad was out doing something, you know. 'Do I sit here all by myself and just cry all day?' and I said, 'No,' I couldn't have that. I needed to be around people. I said, 'Whether I really worked those next few days or not, I needed to be around people', and that was best situation, so you know" (p. 16).</p> <p>Talked about a family who were home during the fire:</p> <p>"They were a bit like us, in the house, we were going to stay with the house, and they had all their fire gear on, all the preventative stuff. The fire was going, they were running from room to room in the house as the fire was burning, yeah, they had got into their swimming pool, but the swimming pool started to boil, and of course the dam was thinner than the – and too far away, their cars had already exploded so they couldn't get out, and they just missed the fire by changing positions each time, and had to walk into Traralgon South.</p> <p>Yeah, well you have these visions of Hiroshima that I had, of children running down the road naked, and that's all I could vision, you know, of what was happening to them, yeah" (p. 17).</p>	<p>Alone at her parents' house – work was a solution – needed interaction, take her mind off her grief. Still in shock at work?</p> <p>Fire affected friends/neighbours came into her work – she works in Traralgon, I think it is a franchise/small business of some sort – to check on her.</p>
Accepting Help:	<p>"It was hard approaching them, if that's what you mean, because as I</p>	<p>Hard for them to ask and then to accept help. Described it as the</p>

	<p>said, we've always been very private people, and then yeah, to have to even ask for anything, or ask for help, you know, that's been the hardest thing, is asking for help.</p> <p><i>And accepting donations or...</i></p> <p>Exactly. A lot of the stuff, when we've gone to the centres, even the Salvos and things, it's hard to accept it because we've never ever, we've always battled on, you know. I wouldn't take anything extra. 'You'll need this for next week.' I said, 'If I want it next week, I'll come and get it, but at the moment I only need this,' as we always said there was worse people than us, you know.</p> <p>There were a lot of people worse off than us, and we considered ourselves lucky and we were together, you know, but yeah. And then you see some people were not very nice, put it like this, and didn't lose anything and yet were grabbing everything that they could, and that was hard to see as well. Here's us with nothing and yet we're not taking anything, and here's them with everything still and they're grabbing whatever they can, yeah.</p> <p>It's brought out the best in people and the worst." (p. 21/2).</p>	<p>"hardest thing" – so this overlaps with the 'hard' code, I should squash them together....</p> <p>Pride/dignity – plays a major role here.</p> <p>The HIERARCHY of loss/grief and how that influences need or entitlement to help?</p> <p>No family member/neighbour/friend perished in the fires.</p> <p>Opportunistic people exploited the generosity of others.</p>
Kinglake/ Marysville:	<p>"And then you start talking about it and that, and it brings back a lot of the emotions, you know. Probably, I think it was the second anniversary of it, [her husband] was away and it was just [her youngest daughter] and I at home, and on ABC2 they showed the documentary they had of through the fire, you know, the <i>Living with the Fire</i>, or <i>Fire in the Ashes</i> or something like that, and so I decided to watch it. I</p>	

	<p>mean I cried all the way, of course, and I did say to [their daughter] that she didn't have to watch it if she didn't want to, because I couldn't come at watching it previously when it was on ABC1, so I watched it, and it actually – because I was very angry at the people of Kinglake and Marysville because all the media was centred on them, but after watching it, it did make me feel a little bit better, and I could sort of understand perhaps a little bit, you know" (p. 8).</p> <p>"We were really forgotten, and not mentioned hardly at all"</p> <p>Me: <i>Does that make it a bit harder?</i></p> <p>"That's what I said, it made me very, very angry. You go down and, 'Where are you from? Did they get fire out there?' 'Well yeah.' I mean we still lost lives and all the homes. I think it was 192 homes that burnt out, so it's still a huge amount" (p. 9).</p>	<p>Fascinating</p> <p>I wonder about the lack of media attention – does it reduce or dilute the wider/public recognition/acknowledgement of what happened in Gippsland?</p> <p>Does media saturation validate what you have endured/survived?</p> <p>This is very interesting – until she watched the documentary, 2 years after the fires – she had felt a great deal of anger about the level of media attention fixed on Marysville/Kinglake. By having a glimpse, via personal stories, into the M/K situation it helped her understand. Is it about the scale of the impact? Most lives/homes were lost in Kingsville/Marysville and the surrounding areas – does this link, at a community/location level – to the hierarchy of loss (that keeps bobbing up)?</p>
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This was my first interview with a fire-affected individual who no longer lives in the 'burnt' community. She was displaced by the fire – which meant living amongst people with no understanding or comprehension of what she and her family had been through and continue to grapple with.

Age/Life Stage – is a major factor particularly in relation to their post-fire decision-making around where home will/can be.

It felt a little surreal to interview her in town – in a cafe – surrounded by the 'normal' hustle and bustle, away from the fire affected landscape. Up until this point I'd conducted all the interviews with participants in their unburnt/damaged or rebuilt homes (in the fire affected zone). I would have liked to have seen/viewed the location of her land in Callignee (the burnt block/acreage) and the surrounding area (in relation to the number of new homes and whether any were for

sale). On this level I felt as if something was missing from the interview – not being able to appreciate/witness the state of her property.

There are pros/cons to being displaced – removed from the blackened landscape. She wasn't confronted daily by the black/grey/ash/dead trees/silence but had she been in that position at least she would have, likely, benefited from being surrounded by understanding/empathetic people/neighbours. The social connection – to fire affected people is absent in this interview.

At times I found it difficult to follow – partly due to the background noise/distraction & partly due to the quantity of change/stress in their post fire lives. There are contradictions – about the decision to buy/not build – and this reflects that she is coming to terms with the loss. What comes through strongly (that overused phrase) is her disbelief that her house has gone. This reinforces that time is not necessarily a healer –over two years later and she struggles, in the present and in the interview, to comprehend what has happened.

My Regret – several lost threads but I am annoyed that I did not ask if there's a time limit on retaining ownership of the 11 acres? [or something along that line of enquiry]....will they sell it at some point? I should have done more exploring around that – holding onto the land whilst knowing rebuilding is not going to happen. What does the land represent? Is holding onto it clutching at the faint prospect of returning? Keeping your options open? Or was that the husband's compromise – we'll retain it but we won't build.....All hypothetical.

Laughter: p. 5, 6, 9, 10, 13, 16, 19 (I was surprised at the laughter – listening back). Which reminded me that humour is not a 'code' – should it be? A sense of humour, the ability to laugh, is critical during reconstruction/recovery.

Her Words:

Troubles: used to describe her husband's mental/emotional health/wellbeing.

Horrible: how she finds living in town/Traralgon

Forgotten: this region – Kinglake/Marysville got all the attention/media focus

Normality: what they were seeking in purchasing a house in town

Black hole: no communication – recovery information was difficult to access (I wonder if this is common amongst those who were forced to relocate to an urban environment).

Angry: at people of Kinglake and Marysville (media attention/obscured the suffering of Gippslanders?).

The Hardest Thing: seeking help/accepting help

HIERARCHY:

*****There were a lot of people worse off than us, and we considered ourselves lucky and we were together, you know, but yeah.** And then you see some people were not very nice, put it like this, and didn't lose anything and yet were grabbing everything that they could, and that was hard to see as well. Here's us with nothing and yet we're not taking anything, and here's them with everything still and they're grabbing whatever they can, yeah" ***

"It's brought out the best in people and the worst."

So you know, **it was just disappointment after disappointment after disappointment**, you know.

"We were really forgotten, and not mentioned hardly at all"

Appendix F: Summary of the Churchill-Jeeralang fire

Website: 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission

<http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/96781/201009230223/vol4.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/indexc35a.html?pid=30>

At about 1.32 pm on 7 February 2009 a fire was reported near the intersection of Glendonald Road and Jelleff's Outlet Road, about 3 kilometres south-east of the Churchill fire station. The fire started in the Bennett's Creek catchment, near forests managed by Hancock Victoria Plantations. By the time crews arrived the fire had rapidly spread south-east, and was burning on both sides of Jelleff's Outlet Road.

By about 2.00 pm the fire was crowning, and continued to head south-east uphill towards the community of Balook. At about 2.10 pm the fire crested the ridge at Jeeralang North Road, and by 2.20 pm it reached Jeeralang Creek West Branch. The fire had travelled about 7 kilometres in 50 minutes. By about 2.45 pm spot fires were burning in steep terrain several kilometres west of Balook, near the head waters of Little Traralgon Creek. At about 3.00 pm a spot fire was reported in the Mays-Bush Jack River Reserve, 20 kilometres south-east of the fire-front.

The fire burnt its first home at about 3.20 pm near the intersection of Thomson Road and Jeeralang North Road. At 4.20 pm the fire crossed Grand Ridge Road, west of Balook, and 30 minutes later it was burning in the vicinity of the Balook Visitors' Centre. By 5.15 pm the main fire was approaching the slopes of Mt Tassie, and spot fires were reported on the mountain's eastern side.

Shortly after 6.00 pm the south-westerly wind change reached the area, pushing the fire north-east. This created a 13 kilometre fire-front that stretched from where the fire started to the base of Mt Tassie. It spotted towards Callignee, Traralgon South and Koornalla. The fire then burned through Hazelwood North, Hazelwood South, Koornalla, Traralgon South, Callignee, Callignee South, Callignee North, Jeeralang, Jeeralang North, Devon, Yarram, Carrajung South and into the Won Wron State Forest.

The fire slowed at about 8.00 pm, although it kept moving north-east. Most of the fire was brought under control on 8 February, but some areas with heavy fuel remained inaccessible and continued to burn. The fire was not fully controlled until 6.00 pm on 19 February. It burned 25,861 hectares and destroyed 145 houses. As a result of the fire 11 people died.

The information used in developing this summary comes from Chapter 9 in Volume 1 of the Commission's Final Report.

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